10¢

The Rio Kid Western

SUMMER ISSUE

THE RAWHIDE KID
By HAPSBURG LIEBE

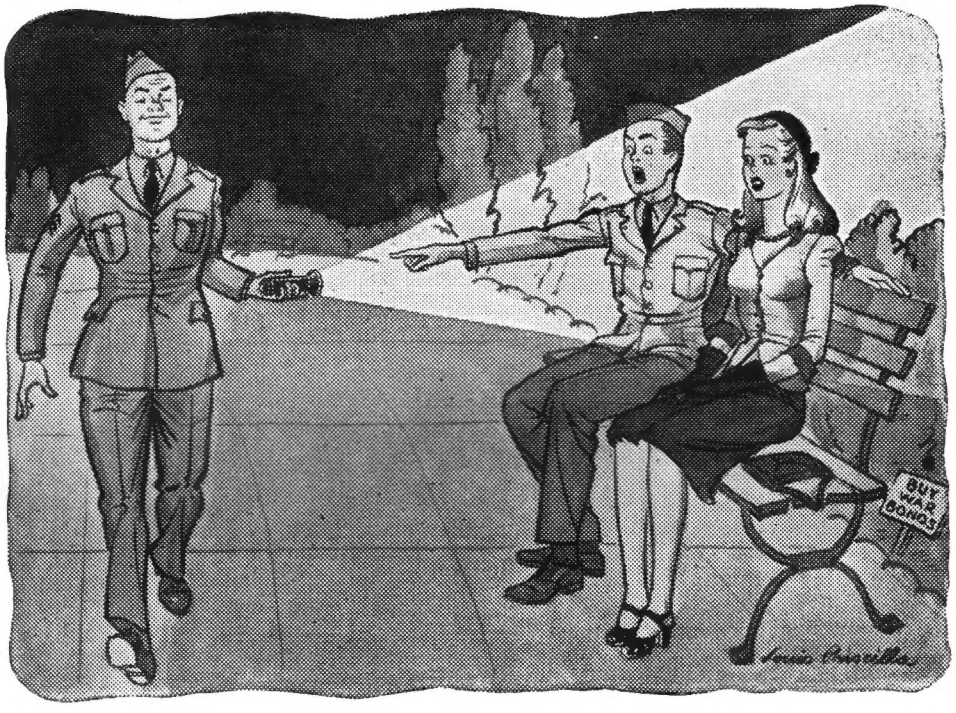
BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS FOR VICTORY!

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Featuring
LORD OF THE Silver Lode
A Complete Bob Pryor Novel
By LEE E. WELLS

PIONEER STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Eveready Batteries



"You're violating the blackout, Sergeant."

A THOUGHT to keep in mind, next time your dealer is out of "Eveready" flashlight batteries: Nearly all we can make right now are being put to good use by either the armed forces or essential war industries.

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... Look for the date line →

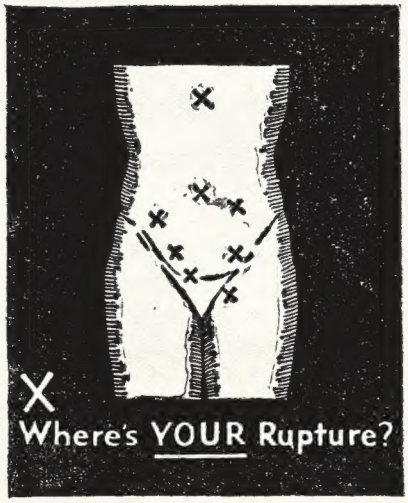
You, personally, can save a soldier's life by giving a pint of blood to the Red Cross. They maintain Blood Donor Centers in 35 cities. Call for an appointment now!

EVEREADY
TRADE-MARK

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.

do you Worry about Rupture?

Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear—if we can help you? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained.* Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.



Why Not Give Nature a Chance?

As long as your rupture can be put back and held in place with the fingers—in other words, if your rupture is completely reducible, why block all hope for a natural recovery by wearing something that **prevents** Nature from working for you? Why not **help** Nature by using the **Brooks Patented AIR-CUSHION Support,** that works with natural physical laws and helps hold most ruptures gently but **securely!** Sometimes, as thousands of Brooks customers have reported, Nature has done such a good job that the use of their truss has been given up! Mind you, we don't expect such results in most cases, but the fact remains that in many cases they have been achieved! FIND OUT! Write for Free Rupture Book!

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Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It brings heavenly comfort and security in most cases—while the Patented Air-Cushion continually works *to help Nature!* Learn what this patented invention may mean to you—send coupon quick!

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT on TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom from fear and worry—the security—the blessed relief thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found our invention the answer to their prayers! And you risk nothing as the complete appliance is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

FREE! Latest Rupture Book Explains All!

SENT YOU IN PLAIN ENVELOPE **JUST CLIP and SEND COUPON** ⟶

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PROOF!

Proof of the value and outstanding merit of the BROOKS APPLIANCE is clearly shown by the fact that over 9000 doctors have ordered it for themselves or their patients. One doctor alone has ordered for his patients over 400 Brooks Appliances. Follow your doctor's advice! If he says you have a reducible rupture and advises a proper-fitting support, don't subject yourself to further delay, which may prove dangerous, but send us your name and address immediately. Stop Your Rupture Worries! Enjoy the comfort, freedom of action and physical security which this made-to-order appliance will give you.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

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Without obligation please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER—all in plain envelope.

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Street .....

City..... State.....

State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

TO OUR READERS: Our new easy-to-read space-saving type conserves paper in conformity with government rationing — and there is NO REDUCTION in reading matter.

The Rio Kid Western

Vol. IX, No. 2 *EVERY STORY BRAND NEW* Summer Issue

A Complete Book-Length Bob Pryor Novel

LORD OF THE SILVER LODE

By LEE E. WELLS

When killer renegades take over Hamilton Town, the Rio Kid and Celestino ride in to make a rousing six-gun clean-up and halt a gigantic mine swindle scheme! 11

Quick-Trigger Short Stories

PAYOFF AT PIUTE WELLS . . . . . John H. Latham 58
The Rudioso Kid couldn't have everything his own way

LITTLE LAWLESS ONE . . . . . Paul Annixter 62
Two bloody despots wage a struggle for domination in the wilds

THE RAWHIDE KID . . . . . Hapsburg Liebe 69
The Cross L waddies learn a cowboy is as a cowboy does

and

THE BUNKHOUSE . . . . . Foghorn Clancy 6
A department conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

Also See Portrait and Biography of William P. Sharon, Page 27; Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), Page 31, and Martin Duggan, Page 35

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July, 1944, issue.

Read our companion magazines: Thrilling Western, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Mystery, Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Football, Popular Western, Popular Detective, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Love, Popular Football, Texas Rangers, G-Men Detective, Air War, West, Sky Fighters, The Phantom Detective, Detective Novels Magazine, Everyday Astrology, Masked Rider Western, R A F Aces, Captain Future, Range Riders Western, Black Book Detective, Rodeo Romances, Popular Crossword Puzzles, Best Crossword Puzzles, Startling Stories, Army Navy Flying Stories, Exciting Love, Exciting Sports, Exciting Detective, and Exciting Western.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

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SAMPLE LESSON

I will send you this FREE Lesson, "Getting Acquainted With Receiver Servicing," to show you how practical it is to train for Radio in spare time. It's a valuable lesson. Study it—keep it—use it—without obligation! Tells how "Superhet" Circuits work, gives hints on Receiver Servicing, Locating Defects, Repair of Loudspeaker, I. F. Transformer, Gang Tuning Condenser, etc. 31 illustrations. And with it I'll send my FREE 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating jobs Radio offers, explains how N.R.I trains you at home for good pay in Radio!

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See How I Train You at Home in Spare Time to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

J. E. SMITH
President
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(Our 30th year)

I Trained These Men

$10 a Week in Spare Time

"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time." JOHN JERRY, 1337 Kalamath St., Denver, Colo.

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"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start in this field." ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

1st Lieutenant in Signal Corps

"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." RICHARD W. ANDERSON (address omitted for military reasons.)

YOU BUILD MANY CIRCUITS WITH PARTS I SEND

By the time you've built this Superheterodyne and many other Radio circuits with the six big kits of Radio parts I send, you will have valuable experience.

Here's your chance to get a good job in a busy wartime field with a bright peacetime future! There is a real shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for a FREE sample lesson and a copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs; tells how N.R.I. trains you at home in spare time; how you get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

More Radio Technicians, Operators Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before

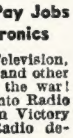
Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting stations, Aviation and Police Radio, and other Radio branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, now working on Government orders for Radio equipment, employ trained men. The Government, too, needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field.

Many Beginners Soon Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

The moment you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to earn EXTRA money fixing Radios. Many make $5, $10 a week EXTRA in spare time while learning. I send you SIX big kits of real Radio parts. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building typical circuits—PROVE what you learn by interesting tests on the circuits you build.

EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, TOO



Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon now! Learning Radio helps Service men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, much higher pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Over 1,700 Service men now enrolled.

Be Ready to Cash in on Good Pay Jobs Coming in Television, Electronics

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GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON **FREE**

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4FO9,
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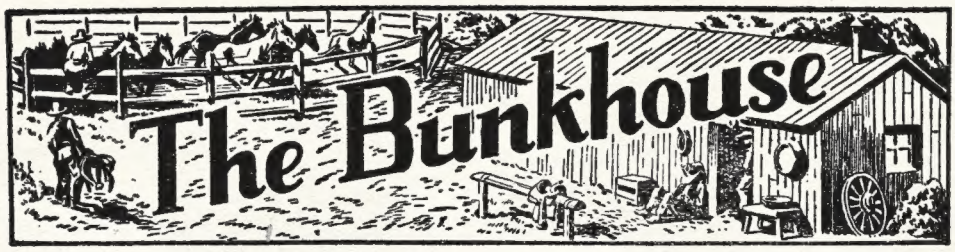


A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HOWDY, waddies, come right in the Bunkhouse, and sit on that bench over there while I tell you about Uncle Dan Stewart, an old-timer, coming over to see me the other day. Of course we had a big gabfest. The conversation finally drifted around to early days in old Oklahoma and Indian Territory before statehood, and among the good men and bad men that we talked of there were two in particular that I was acquainted with, one a lawman and the other an outlaw.

The lawman was Frank M. Canton. He had been to Alaska, to the Klondike in search of riches during the gold rush, and like many others he had returned, not rich, but with a lot more experience as to the ways of men.

About the time he returned to Oklahoma, as he had stopped off in Wyoming for quite a while, the Kiowa and Comanche Indian Reservations were opened to settlement. The land headquarters of the Kiowa country was opened in Lawton, which prior to that time was little more than a wide place in the road, but thousands of homeseekers rushed in, and the town grew from a small village to a camp of more than ten thousand population in little more than a week.

A Regular Boom Town

It was a regular Western tented boom town and of course the bad men from other states and sections had drifted in along with the actual homeseekers and it was necessary for that section to have a sheriff. There was no time to elect one, in fact the new citizens did not yet have the right to vote, so Bill Painter was appointed, and knowing what a tough assignment he had he sent for Frank Canton to come over and help him handle the job.

This was in 1901 and the county in which the newly appointed sheriff was supposed to enforce the law was a big one extending clear to the Red River, and some of the toughest men in the Southwest were sojourning in that county.

Horse and cattle thieves were plentiful, and the Bert Casey gang of robbers and murderers were operating in that section at the time also. They were the most vicious and merciless gang of young outlaws of that time. They held up and robbed a prominent citizen, Dr. Beanblossom and party, near Rush Springs, and then deliberately shot and killed the Doctor's young son.

Finally the law of that entire section of the country seemed to concentrate on running down the Casey gang and made short work of them. Jim Thompson, sheriff of Caddo County, Bill Fossett, U. S. Marshal, and Deputy Christ Madsen, finally got them.

Bert Casey and one of his trusted lieutenants was killed by two of Fossett's deputies. Two of the gang, Marian and Parkins, were captured and received life sentences and that broke up one gang of outlaws, but it seemed that as soon as one gang was broken up another came along to take its place.

Outlaw Ben Cravens

Bill Painter finally retired, and C. C. Hammond was elected sheriff. Canton remained as a deputy under Hammond for quite a while then accepted a position with the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association in charge of criminal work in the Osage country of Oklahoma and moved his family to Fairfax, a little village in the Osage, not far from the Kansas line, and in the course of his duties in that section of the country cut the trail of an outlaw that I afterward became acquainted with, and while this acquaintance was only slight, it was close enough to suit me.

Ben Cravens first came to the attention of the law of the Southwest when he started selling bootleg liquor to the Indians, getting away without being caught. He took up cattle stealing and after a time was arrested by Frank Canton who took him to Perry, Oklahoma, and turned him over to Deputy U. S. Marshal Nix, who was in charge of the Perry jail.

In less than a week Cravens broke jail and released all the other prisoners, then he began robbing banks, post offices and stores in small towns.

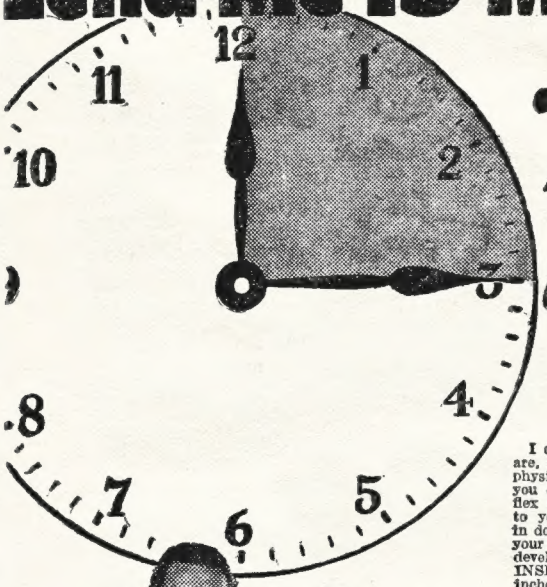
Many Escapes

The robbing of post offices along with the stores and banks of course set all the federal officers of the Southwest on Cravens' trail

(Continued on page 73)

Lend Me 15 Minutes A Day

..and I'll prove I can make you a NEW MAN



I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them.

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

HERE'S WHAT ONLY 15 MINUTES A DAY CAN DO FOR YOU

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

I WAS A 97-lb. WEAKLING

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is *"Dynamic Tension,"* the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

Actual photo of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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America's Greatest "Builder of Men"

Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT. That name is **Charles Atlas!**

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And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others (even those already in their country's Army and Navy) are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs.

HERE'S PROOF RIGHT HERE!

"Result comes so fast by your method that it seems just as if some magician put on the pounds of solid muscle just where you want them!" —W. L., Missouri

"Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—A 2" GAIN!" —L. A. S., Illinois

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"Your book opened my eyes . . . 1¼" gain on my biceps and 1" more on my chest." —J. F., Penna.

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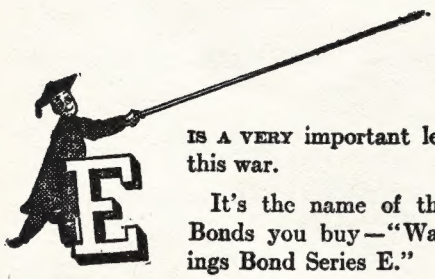
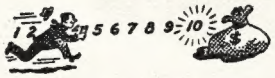
Some ABC stuff about E



IS A VERY important letter in this war.

It's the name of the War Bonds you buy—"War Savings Bond Series E."

As you know, a Series E Bond will work for you for ten full years, piling up interest all that time, till finally you'll get four dollars back for every



three you put up. Pretty nice.

The first job of the money you put into "E" is, of course, to help finance the war. But it also gives you a wonderful way to save money.

And when the war is over, that money you now put away can do another job, can help America swing over from war to peace.

There'll come a day when you'll bless these Bonds—when they may help you over a tough spot.

That's why you should hang on to every Bond you buy. You can, of course, cash in your Bonds any time after you've held them for 60 days. You get all your money back, and, after one year, all your money plus interest,

But when you cash in a Bond, you end its life before its full job is done. You don't give it its chance to help you and the country in the years that lie ahead. You kill off its $4-for-every-$3 earning power.

All of which it's good to remember when you

might be tempted to cash in some of your War Bonds. They are yours, to do what you want with.

But . . . it's ABC sense that . . .

They'll do the best job for you and for America if you let them reach the full flower of maturity!

WAR BONDS to Have and to Hold

The Treasury Department acknowledges with appreciation the publication of this message by

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for less than 7¢ a day!

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"I've always wanted to play the piano accordion," writes *H. E. *from Canada.* "But thought I'd never learn it. Then I read about your lessons. I don't know how to express my satisfaction."

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"Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I have taken lessons before under teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best."
—*A. O., Minn.*

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

LEARNED QUICKLY AT HOME

"I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. . . . I had always heard it couldn't be done. You can imagine my surprise when after 3 or 4 weeks I found I could play real tunes. Now when I play people will hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time. Any person who takes your piano course and studies it cannot help but learn to play."

H. C. S., California

You, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument —quickly, easily—right in your own home!

YOU SAY you'd love to learn music but can't afford a private teacher? Then listen to this . . . You can now learn to play your favorite instrument—as thousands of others have—for LESS THAN SEVEN CENTS A DAY! And that small sum covers everything—including sheet music! It doesn't take long, either. You can learn to play quicker than you ever dreamed possible!

Learn to play by playing Real Tunes

Yes, that's exactly what you do. From the start you actually play familiar melodies. As you master one, you go on to another.

How is it possible? Well, you learn by a modern method that does away with humdrum scales and exercises. You spend your time playing interesting pieces from real notes. It's really FUN learning to play this modern way—it makes practicing a pastime instead of a bore. More than 750,000 pupils have enrolled for this amazing course.

A Sound Method

The secret of this method that has taught thousands to play is simple. It's based on the fact that the lessons not only *tell* you what to do, in the printed instructions. They actually *show* you—with large, clear pictures—what positions to take—every move to make. You *read* how to play a tune — you see how to play it—then you play it and hear how it goes. A teacher at your side couldn't make it more clear.

NOTICE

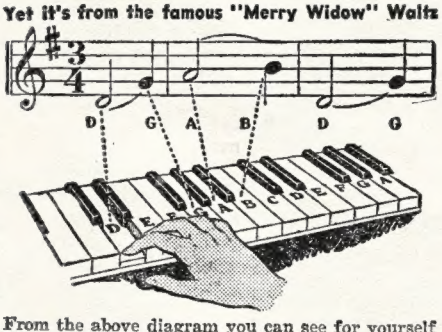
Please don't confuse the U. S. School of Music method with any system of teaching music "by ear" or by trick charts. Our method teaches you to play by actual notes—not by any trick or number system.

Print and Picture Sample — FREE

If you're really interested in learning music quickly and easily—and with little expense, send for our Free Booklet and Free Print and Picture Sample *today.* Don't wait. Fill in the coupon now—checking your favorite instrument. U. S. School of Music, 2946 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y. Forty-sixth year. (Est. 1898.)

SIMPLE AS A-B-C

Yet it's from the famous "Merry Widow" Waltz



From the above diagram you can see for yourself how easy it is to learn by this Print and Picture method. You simply look at the music and diagram and see which notes to strike. In a few minutes you find yourself playing the famous "Merry Widow Waltz."

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Hawaiian Guitar	Saxophone	Clarinet	Mandolin
Violin	Trumpet, Cornet	Trombone	Practical Finger Control
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The Mechanism of Mind

WHY YOU ARE AS YOU ARE—
and *What You Can Do About It!*

DID you ever stop to think *why* you do the things you do? Have you often—when alone—censored yourself for impulsive urges, for things said or done that did not truly represent *your real thoughts,* and which placed you at a disadvantage? Most persons are *creatures of sensation*—they react to instinctive, impelling influences which surge up within them and which they do not understand—*or know how to control.* Just as simple living things involuntarily withdraw from irritations, so likewise thousands of men and women are content to be motivated by their undirected thoughts which haphazardly rise up in their consciousness. *Today you must sell yourself* to others—bring forth your best abilities, manifest your personality, if you wish to hold a position, make friends, or impress others with your capabilities. You must learn how to draw upon your latent talents and powers, not be bent like a reed in the wind. There are simple, natural laws and principles which—if you understand them—make all this possible.

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THE ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC), SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

The Rio Kid tumbled limply from saddle and dropped over the rock wall (CHAPTER IX)

LORD OF THE SILVER LODE

By LEE E. WELLS

When killer renegades take over Hamilton Town, the Rio Kid and Celestino ride in to make a rousing six-gun clean-up and halt a gigantic mine swindle scheme!

CHAPTER I

The Plotters

THROUGH the open windows the never-ending pound of the stamp mills sounded. It blended with the noise of the street, the crack of whips over mules pulling heavy ore wagons, the rumble of big freighters, lurid oaths of the bullwhackers and the constant pound of feet up and down the plank sidewalk.

Just another day in Virginia City.

Two men sat in the room, one behind an ornate roll-top desk. The other sat in a chair, big booted feet stretched out, a self-satisfied smirk on his heavy face. A heavy, cartridge-looped belt was about his sizable paunch and a six-gun was snugged to the broad hip. Broad

A FULL BOOK-LENGTH FRONTIER ACTION NOVEL

thumbs were hooked in his flowered vest. His face was heavy-boned, the chin protruding and the dimple in it concealed the hard, cruel set of the jaw. Slate-gray eyes beneath craggy brows held a greedy glitter.

"Things has shore gone smooth, Sharon," he was saying. "A little bit more and I could hand the whole town of Hamilton right over to yuh."

The man behind the desk made a slight gesture of dismissal. His dark eyes were slightly narrowed in the finely chiseled face as though he calculated the value of everything he saw.

"You can have the town, Jed," he said coldly. "To tear down, build up, sell, or barter. I want control of the Hamilton mines."

Jed Harker nodded.

"Yuh got some of them mines already, Sharon. Yuh'll have more as soon as I get back."

William Sharon tapped a restless tattoo on the desk. He had already made a sizable fortune here in Virginia City, but not enough to assuage his thirst for wealth. The tight-held lips and narrowed eyes held the secret of a thousand and one financial deals.

The hard set of the long jaw and the deep lines between the eyes were marks of the no-quarter fights he had waged—and won—to control the mines whose stamp mills rumbled in his ears. He had fought fang and claw, but he understood predatory wolves. Besides, William Sharon did not give a snap of his soft white fingers how he made money. It was the money itself that counted.

His shrewd eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Harker, I'm always suspicious when things go as well as you report them."

Jed Harker chuckled. "There ain't a thing that I can't control. Colt Barlow and his boys have shore run the six-gun brand on Hamilton and there ain't nobody ready to buck it."

"How about the law?" Sharon asked.

"It can't do a thing. There's a button ain't dry behind the ears that totes the marshal's badge. He ain't got the gun-savvy to go against Barlow's boys, so he's sort of hog-tied."

Sharon rubbed his hands together. "That sounds all right. How about the mayor? The citizens?"

JED HARKER'S eyes flickered with uncertainty, which Sharon was quick to see.

"Tell me the whole truth, Harker," he demanded.

"Well, Sharon, I'd say generally the mayor and the rest is helpless to do much. But nobody can stop 'em talkin'. I've heard talk about bringin' in a town-tamer, a fightin' marshal, to clean out the gamblers, gunhawks and renegades. But the talk ain't started any action."

"Who have they suggested to carry the law badge?" Sharon asked.

"Well"— Harker's smile was not quite so wide and confident— "Wyatt Earp has been mentioned. Also Wild Bill Hickok, Martin Duggan, and a heap of a palaver about the Rio Kid."

Sharon whistled soundlessly. He touched the rich silk cravat and pulled down on the lapels of his fine cloth coat. Absently he twirled a silver charm on the watch-chain across his vest.

"Harker," he said, "you've named real trouble. Sure, you've hired gunmen, plenty of them. Maybe Colt Barlow's as fast a man with a six as there is in Nevada. But Earp, Hickok, Duggan—to say nothing of the Rio Kid—spells trouble."

"I ain't worried," Harker said brusquely.

"But I am!" Sharon snapped. "I want control of those mines. I don't care how much silver's in them, whether there's any at all. But if I own the mines, I can sell silver stock all over the country. I can skyrocket the value and get out from under before the boom plays out. You're playing for thousands of dollars, Harker. I'm playing for millions—and I play to win."

Harker sat up stiffly, a look of sullen respect in his eyes. "What do I do?"

Sharon arose and paced to the window. He looked down at the crowded street for a long time before he said a word. Then he turned with sudden decision.

"You get back to Hamilton, pronto. Start talk that the young marshal is good enough. If you get some tinhorn you don't need, throw him to the law. That'll keep them satisfied for a while."

"I got a man like that," Harker said thoughtfully. "I been wonderin' how to get rid of him."

"I'm winding up a deal here," Sharon went on, as if Harker hadn't spoken. "As soon as it's finished, I'll come to Hamilton to give those mine claims my personal attention. If a new marshal—one of those you mentioned is brought in, there's only one thing you can do." He looked hard at Harker. "You understand what that will be."

Harker grinned. "Shore. Yuh want him salivated quick before he can do anything."

Sharon drew himself up. "I've never ordered the death of any man. I won't now. I leave the whole thing up to you."

Harker picked up his fine Stetson. He stared at Sharon a moment, then his thick lips curled in a knowing grin.

"Yuh can just stop worrying about it, Sharon," he said. "Ain't no lawman going to cripple our plans. . . ."

Join a Grim Death-Dealing Plunder Game

Across miles of desert and mountain to the east, another man looked out an upstairs window. His wrinkled, toil-worn face set in heavy lines as he watched a gunhung man cross the crowded street and push through the batwings of a saloon.

The man at the window pushed his fingers through a mane of silver hair. Blue eyes snapped angrily.

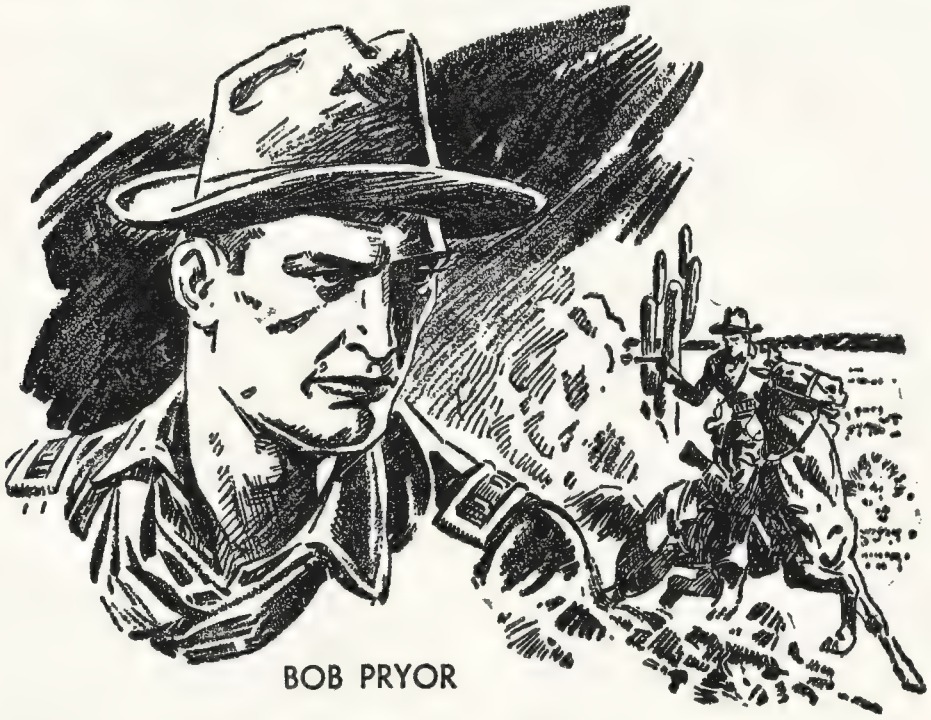
"Colt Barlow's still around," he mumbled to the big man seated at a battered desk. "Jeremiah, there ain't a better time than now to get one of them gun-toting lawman in. Harker's been out of town for a week."

"Mebbe—mebbe not," Smith answered. "Suppose we sort of mix up the trail for Harker and that gun crew of Colt Barlow's. Suppose we get 'em plumb runnin' in circles."

"How?" Donner asked.

"Easy. Write to Duggan, say, and then we'll shore spread it over town that he's comin' to straighten things up. But supposin' the Rio Kid slipped in and went to work while Barlow was keepin' mighty busy fightin' Duggan?"

Donner's troubled blue eyes looked blankly out the window. He spoke thouhtfully, as though reviewing the situation aloud.



BOB PRYOR

Jeremiah Donner nodded ponderously, just as he did everything else. His big splay fingers pulled a fresh sheet of paper closer and he reached for the gnawed pen-holder in a small glass tray. The iron-gray whiskers that fringed his rocky chin seemed to bristle.

"Which'll it be, Silver? I can get Earp over in Kansas, and Hickok's over on that range, too. Martin Duggan's in Colorado. The Rio Kid is somewhere in New Mexico."

"Silver" Smith dropped in a chair and tugged hard at an ear lobe. "If what we think is true about Harker, it's going to be a tough job. Mebbe more'n one hombre can handle."

"Not for any one of them fellers." Donner laughed mirthlessly.

"Duggan has the reputation of bein' a rough fighter and an honest lawman. He uses Colts and fists and runs renegades out of town if he don't salivate 'em first. He's a man to side yuh in a fight."

"He'd take care of Barlow and the tinhorns that shore has crowded into Hamilton," Smith said. "But Jed Harker ain't that kind of a snake."

"I know." Donner nodded. "Jed Harker has somebody back of him, somebody that aims to control Hamilton behind the scenes. Harker ain't a miner and yet he has grabbed off two or three mines in the last month. Why?"

"I don't know. But Martin Duggan could never work out that puzzle."

Donner sighed and shook his head.

"No, nor Wild Bill Hickok either. Earp might, but there's another hombre who shore gets to the bottom of crooked deals. Besides, he's as deadly a gun fighter as any of the others. He ain't never backed down to any renegade and some says he has sworn to fight every outlaw, bandit and crooked schemer who crosses his trail."

"The Rio Kid!" Smith exclaimed eagerly. "Between Duggan and the Rio Kid we'd whipsaw Harker into a box canyon with no way out. We'd pull the mask off the hombre who backs Harker. Jeremiah, them two lawmen was made to order for Hamilton's troubles."

Donner reached for the pen.

"I believe yuh, Smith. These letters will go out today."

CHAPTER II

Boom Town Welcome

ABOUT a month later, two riders pulled to a halt on a ridge overlooking Hamilton. The town sprawled out toward the forested ridge called Treasure Hill, where the biggest strike had been made. Its frame houses and stores were fringed by a wide circle of tents and huts. At least a dozen saloons were in sight from the ridge and the two riders would see many more once they had ridden into the town.

The taller of the two men wore a dark blue shirt and whipcord breeches tucked into Army boots, heeled with heavy silver spurs. Boots and clothing now were covered with the dust of a long trail that led back to Utah and then south into New Mexico, though as a usual thing this man prided himself on being spick and span. He wore a campaign hat that topped chestnut hair on a well-shaped head. Two heavy sixes were snugged at each thigh and he carried two more inside his shirt.

His eyes were startling blue in the clean-cut tanned face, and the set of the strong chin marked the grim, hard-fighting man. His lips were broad and firm and yet there was a suggestion of humor in the corners that softened the grim lines of his face.

He was Captain Bob Pryor, known from Montana to Mexico as the Rio Kid. The angle of his hat, the wide shoulders and slim body marked the cavalry officer—which he once had been. Now his lightning-fast guns were freely offered to those who sought to establish justice, law and order, or who fought to break outlaw rule wherever found.

The Rio Grande country of Texas had been his home. When the War Between the States had broken like a storm over the country, he had offered his services to the Union. He had known the bite of the sabers of Jeb Stuart's cavalrymen. He had faced charging bayonets unflinchingly. Sherman and Custer had recognized his bravery and had been quick to use his ability as a scout.

But four years of war had left searing memories. When peace had finally come, he had started for home. But Fate had not intended for Captain Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, ever to return to his old life.

Border outlaws had attacked his home, burned it, and killed his parents. From that moment he rode the vengeance trail, and dedicated his life to the righting of wrongs wherever he might find men oppressed or robbed. His reputation grew until he was known all over the West, respected by most, but hated and feared by outlaws and renegades.

"Thees Hamilton, she don't look so *muy malo,*" his comrade commented. "We have seen the bad towns, my General—Leadville, Tombstone, Abilene. *Madre de Dios!* Those were the bad ones."

The Rio Kid chuckled and his hand stroked his mouse-colored dun mount with the black stripe down its back—Saber, his cavalry horse of "the breed that never dies." His keen eyes swept over the sprawling jumble of buildings.

"Yuh can't always tell the brand of a cow by lookin' at its face, Celestino," he reminded. "I reckon we'll find enough general cussedness in that valley yonder to keep us busy a spell."

Celestino Mireles shrugged slim shoulders. He pulled the brim of his sombrero lower over his liquid brown eyes. His face was cream-colored, the mark of the high-born Mexican, and accented by high cheekbones. His lips were always ready to smile or to flatten into a thin, fighting line. He wore a high-crowned sombrero, little jacket and trousers that flared at the bottom over his fine high-heeled boots. Around his slim waist was a gun-belt and a rifle rested snugly in a scabbard on his saddle.

The Rio Kid had saved the life of Celestino Mireles, rescuing him from a band of renegades in the Rio Grande country. From that moment on, Celestino had devoted his life to his "General", as he called Captain Bob Pryor. He was the Rio Kid's shadow, his guard, his devoted friend and companion.

The Rio Kid lightly applied the spurs to Saber and Celestino followed him down the steep road to the town.

The streets of Hamilton were congested. The two men threaded a slow way between wagons, buggies, freighters, horsemen. The planked sidewalks were lined by hurrying people all seemingly eager to catch a portion of the silver wealth in the nearby hills.

Saloons appeared to occupy every other building on both sides of the street, though there also were stores of every description. Almost as numerous as the saloons were little places for the sale and purchase of mining claims and real estate.

As Cramer fired, Nevada suddenly crumpled forward and pitched out the window (CHAPTER XIV)

AS THE Rio Kid and Celestino rode through the crowd there was a sudden rumbling and the jingling of chains. The way opened for a twenty-four-mule team pulling a gigantic load of supplies. The jerkline driver and his helper cursed loudly and the big wagon moved down the street. The living stream of humans and horses closed in behind it.

The Rio Kid's quick glance caught the sign for which he had been searching. It spread across a two-storied building. Big gold letters on a red background proclaimed:

JEREMIAH T. DONNER
SUPPLIES, HARDWARE, GROCERIES

A touch of the reins and Saber started angling toward a hitch-rack.

When at last the Rio Kid and Celestino stepped inside the wide doorway, the store was as crowded as the street. Booted men moved slowly down the aisles. Barrels and boxes seemed to be piled in every available space. Clerks moved at a constant trot, and talk was a loud rumble.

The Rio Kid worked his way to the rear where a high partition divided a little space from the larger room. A thin, pinch-faced man peered out a little wicket window and accepted money from the clerks.

"Is Mr. Donner around?" the Rio Kid asked him.

"No," the man said with a nasal whine. He peered up at a big clock on the wall. "It'll be an hour at least before he gets here."

"Thanks," the Rio Kid said pleasantly. As he headed for the door he told Celestino, "We'll get an idea of Hamilton before we talk to Donner."

They joined the flow on the walks outside and let the crowd carry them down the street. As in any typical mining town miners, gamblers, cowboys, teamsters, drifters mingled and rubbed shoulders, pushed and shoved. Gunbelts were everywhere in evidence and greed and excitement seemed to be mirrored in every pair of eyes.

A man in loud clothing tugged at the Rio Kid's sleeve. On his red face was an ingratiating smile. "How about a good claim, pardner? Yuh come to make yore pile and I got just the place. It's plumb loaded with silver. Say, it won't take no diggin' hardly at all."

"That's too bad," the Rio Kid replied gravely. "There ain't nothing I like better than swingin' a pick in good, hard ground. It might do you some good, too, hombre."

He broke away with Celestino before the speculator could reply.

The further the Rio Kid walked, the more he felt he understood the town. The feel of it was in the crowd, everywhere.

"There's bound to be trouble here, *amigo*," he said to Celestino. "A place like this attracts sidewinders and renegades. Mebbe Donner really has a problem to hold a check-rein on the town."

They passed slowly before a wide office room that bore the sign:

CONSOLIDATED HAMILTON CO.

The Rio Kid glanced at the loafers before the door and his hand dropped close to the Colts at his side. He recognized the thin-lipped, harsh-eyed gun breed. It was in the tied-down holsters, the insolent stares, the narrow-eyed silence and alertness of the men. Here, thought the Rio Kid, would be one of the trouble spots.

Suddenly a shout brought him whirling around. The crowd had parted swiftly, clearing a space around two men who faced each other angrily. One was lanky, his bony wrists showing inches below a faded shirt. His light hair escaped in wild strings from under a battered hat. Gray eyes blazed wrathfully in a pale, thin face.

"Unger, yuh ain't got the nerve of a snake!" he was shouting. "If I had a gun, I'd shore make yuh eat them threats."

The other man's slow grin showed stained teeth. He was big and burly, with thick arms and legs. His muddy eyes glittered. His stub fingers taloned over a gun in a well-worn holster. Plainly he was a gunhawk and nothing else, though he wore cowboy garb.

"Cramer," he said coldly, "yuh're a thief. That claim belonged to yore pardner and yuh forced him out. Yuh yell like a dyin' Comanche when the same thing happens to you."

"Liar!" Cramer choked.

He took a forward step and Unger set into a crouch, his fingers hovering over his gun.

Some of the gunhawks had pushed their way close to the two men. The Rio Kid's lips set in a hard line as Unger again began taunting Cramer, spewing curses and accusations at him.

CRAMER'S face became red with blazing anger. His fists doubled and the Rio Kid saw that he was about to attack the man with the gun. Unger still threw taunts at Cramer that no man could stand. At last Cramer exploded into action. He jumped forward with a strangled cry, fists swinging. Unger faded to one side and his hand blurred down. The heavy six seemed to jump from the holster.

A gun roared and Unger yelled in pain. His six flew from smashed, bleeding fingers. Cramer plowed to a surprised halt, gray eyes swiveling around to the slim figure in blue who held a smoking Colt in his hand. Icy blue eyes held Unger.

"So yuh'd have gunned down an unarmed man?" the Rio Kid asked coldly. "Let's hear yore big talk now that yore fangs have been pulled."

Unger nursed his hand and stared at the Rio Kid, his face contorted in anger and fear. The lithe, blue-clad figure, gun still held loose in one hand, turned to Cramer.

"I reckon yuh can settle this argument man to man now."

"Not Nevada Unger," Cramer grunted in disgust. "There ain't no more fight in him."

He pointed scornfully at Unger, who held his hand and fearfully eyed the Rio Kid. Cramer hitched up his belt.

"That's the way with all of Barlow's gunnies. They ain't makin' a move till all the cards are comin' their way. It's more than an honest man can stomach. I—"

"General!" Celestino shouted. "The others!"

The Rio Kid whirled. The gunhawks had pushed through the crowd and now stood around him in a silent, deadly ring. Cold eyes watched him, taloned hands quivering over gun butts. Killer lust showed in half a dozen faces.

Unger suddenly lost his fear.

"Blast him, boys! Give him a one-way ticket to Boot Hill!"

CHAPTER III

Behind Bars

THE Rio Kid didn't seem to move, yet he was suddenly in a crouch. No emotion showed on his clear-cut face and the six still hung limp in his hand. But it could go into instant deadly action. Celestino stood to one side of him, his limpid brown eyes now as cold as stone.

Bob Pryor's glance, disdainful, alert, flicked like a whiplash across the gunnies' faces. He was only dimly aware that the crowd had suddenly vanished, seeking sanctuary in doorways and behind wagons and corners.

Unger kept edging away, but his curses sounded loud and bold. The rest of the men remained tense and silent, waiting for the break that would allow the first Colt to snake from leather.

The Rio Kid realized that he was in a deadly trap. But his very boldness held the gunslammers in check. They couldn't understand a man facing a dozen deadly guns and not flinching.

Then, slowly, what the Rio Kid had feared started. The renegades started spreading out to left and right. In another minute the shooting would begin and the Rio Kid grimly wondered how many of the wolf breed he could bring down with him.

Abruptly then, the Rio Kid noticed a change in the quick, sudden bunching of the men. Their glances cut beyond him, but he didn't turn his head. Whoever came up behind him would not be so dangerous as these trigger hungry gents he faced. So far, sheer bluff had held them but that was fast running out.

A young man stepped past the Rio Kid and faced the gunmen. He wore black clothing and his trousers stuck down into polished black boots. He wore a star on the shirt and his lean waist supported a studded belt and holster.

"Break it up," he said calmly.

One of the gunmen swore and his hand stabbed down toward his gun. The Rio Kid flipped up his own six and his bullet knocked the man's leg out from under him. The marshal's draw was fast, a blur of hand and metal. His Peacemaker menaced the crowd. The gunslammers faced three now and they knew the Rio Kid could be deadly. They gave the trio dark, threatening glances, milled uncertainly and then broke up.

The young marshal turned to the Rio Kid. He was tall and at first glance looked thin. But the Rio Kid detected the supple muscles, the lithe flow of the man's movements. His smile was wide and friendly and his hazel eyes twinkled as he shoved his six back in the holster.

"Thanks, pilgrim. I didn't see that snake movin' toward his hardware."

"There was too many of 'em to watch," the Rio Kid chuckled. "I was havin' a little trouble that way myself."

"My name's Adams," the young man said and extended his hand. "Tex Adams, marshal of this here section of Hades. What was the trouble?"

Cramer pushed forward angrily.

"That Nevada Unger was crowdin' me into a fight. I didn't have a gun and he must have figgered it was a safe play. This jasper stepped in when I lost my head and I reckon that started things rollin'."

Tex Adams gave the Rio Kid a searching, weighing look and the smile left. His voice was still friendly but he left no doubt that he meant every word he said.

"I hold the law in Hamilton, stranger. I try to make it fair and square for everyone and I play no favorites. Yuh'd better savvy that right off if yuh aim to stay in town."

"I understand," the Rio Kid said quietly.

His liking and respect for Tex Adams had grown immensely. He was young, green to the law-badge job, but he was trying.

Tex nodded, smiled, and turned away. He walked to the Consolidated Hamilton office and disappeared inside. The crowd surged back into the street and eddied around Cramer, Celestino and the Rio Kid. Cramer, smiling ruefully, turned to the Rio Kid.

"Look at him. Walkin' right in where Nevada Unger is lickin' his hurts! Right where Colt Barlow rules the roost. Tex Adams is a good man and he'll make a good lawman—if he lives long enough to learn the ropes. I shore owe yuh a heap of thanks, hombre. I reckon I'd have been in a real tight."

The Rio Kid's friendly grin flashed out and he made a gesture that dismissed the thanks. He and Celestino had started to turn away when there was a flurry at the Consolidated's door. Tex Adams came out, and a big man followed angrily at his heels. Tex had lost his smile when he came up to the Rio Kid.

"Is this him, Harker?" he said to the man with him.

Harker nodded. "Nevada told me about it and half a dozen of my boys have confirmed Nevada's story. I'll prefer charges, Marshal. It's time some of these trouble-makers around town were taught a lesson."

TEX looked uncertain, then shrugged. "I think yuh're readin' sign plumb wrong, Harker. But yuh're preferrin' charges and there ain't nothin' else I can do."

"Judge Ransdale will take care of him." Harker grinned. "Hamilton has to learn how to be peaceful if we fill up yore jail until she busts the seams."

"Jed Harker has accused yuh of disturbin' the peace and attemptin' to incite a riot," Tex Adams said to the Rio Kid. "I think Nevada threw a big windy, but I ain't supposed to think—just carry out the law. Pilgrim, I got to arrest yuh."

Celestino made an angry gesture toward his holster, but the Rio Kid's quick hand stopped him. He looked Harker over carefully, from heavy face and shifty eyes to highly-polished boots.

"I'll go peaceful, Marshal," he said.

Harker smiled coldly and turned back to the office. Cramer tried to argue with Tex but uselessly.

"Mebbe yuh're right, Cramer," he said. "But it's the law. Yuh can tell Judge Ransdale about it."

"Judge Ransdale!" Cramer snorted. "He's Harker's man right straight through."

Tex Adams held out his hands and the Rio Kid gave him the guns in his holsters. But he said nothing about those concealed beneath his shirt. Celestino followed his General and the young marshal to the town jail, a stout structure of heavy logs with iron bars set deep in the window frames.

Tex closed the barred door on the Rio Kid and turned the lock.

"I shore hate this," he said. "But I'll see that the judge brings up the case right away."

"Could I send Celestino for a friend?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Shore. Anything I can do to make things easy."

"Go to the store," the Rio Kid told Celestino, "and tell Donner where I am—and why."

"Is Jeremiah yore friend?" Tex asked, surprised. "Shucks, I'll go tell him myself."

He left the corridor and the two men heard the front door slam shut. Celestino stared mournfully through the bars at the Rio Kid.

"General, thees thing she's not right. You should not be in thees jail."

The Rio Kid's blue eyes sparkled.

"Don't let it bother yuh, *amigo*. We don't know a thing about this town nor why Donner sent for us. I figger mebbe Donner might not want the whole place to know who I am. I figger this Harker hombre is goin' to cause us a heap of trouble. No use showing our cards until we know what we're up against."

"*Si, si,*" Celestino agreed uncertainly. "But the Rio Kid in *calaboza! Por Dios*, eet is not to theenk about!"

Steps sounded and heavy voices. Celestino turned as Adams came in with two men. One was so big his bald head came close to touching the ceiling. His strong, lined face was worried, the blue eyes dark with anger. A fringe of whiskers bristled around his rocky chin. He went instantly to the cell door.

"Captain Pryor?" he boomed. "I'm Jeremiah Donner. I'm glad yuh got here."

"It was a quick trip to the jail." The Rio Kid smiled.

Donner turned ponderously. "Tex, the charges against Captain Pryor are such that he can be released on bail. I'll post it but I don't want my name mentioned. Savvy?"

Tex unlocked the cell door and grinned widely.

"That was a short stay."

Donner entered the cell.

"Sit down, Pryor. I guess this is the best place in Hamilton to talk without interruption. Here's somebody I want yuh to meet. Martin Duggan."

The Rio Kid looked around, startled. The second man grinned. He was Black Irish, with a narrow, devil-may-care face, his wide crooked lips showing the utter ruthlessness that ruled him. Black eyes snapped under thick black brows. His long nose had been broken, his chin was like an out-thrust rock. He was stocky yet there was a tigerish grace about him that spoke of blinding speed.

A gun was snugged low at one hip, the holster tied down, and he wore a flat hat, decorated with a silver-ornamented band.

"The last time we met," he said, "was in Leadville. We was both mighty busy salivatin' skunks."

"Yuh know one another?" Donner asked, in pleased surprise.

The Rio Kid nodded and shook hands with the famous lawman.

"But it's been a long time since we met," he said.

DONNER ponderously considered the two lean fighting men. They were worlds apart in appearance, yet there was some subtle similarity between them. The ever-present threat of outlaw guns had given them both the same piercing, quick look, the same coordinated, speedy flow of supple muscles.

"I asked both of yuh to come to Hamilton," Donner said at last, "for a definite purpose. Duggan's job will be in the open. He'll carry a special marshal's badge and I want every gunhawk, tinhorn and renegade in Hamilton in deadly fear of him."

"Sizable job," the Rio Kid said quietly. "But Martin's the man for yuh. How about me?"

"Yores won't be easy, Pryor. Yuh'll carry

no badge, yuh'll have no law backin'. While Duggan is raisin' a heap of dust and drawin' attention, you work behind the scenes. Jed Harker is to get yore attention."

The Rio Kid flashed Celestino a smile.

"I had him picked. What's he done?"

"He's moved into here with as cutthroat a crew of gunslammers as I ever saw. They're headed by a big red-headed gent named Barlow. Barlow takes orders from Jed Harker and we're not shore who Harker takes orders from."

"Martin," the Rio Kid drawled, "we've run into gents like these before—greedy sidewinders who want to rule the town, all the business, and don't care how that's brought about."

"That is true about Harker, up to a certain point," Donner conceded. "But we've had sev-

CELESTINO MIRELES

eral hints that there's somethin' else. For instance, Colt Barlow's men have jumped several minin' claims. Jed sinks his fingers into 'em. Then pretty soon Jed's transferred the claims to Consolidated Hamilton. Why?"

"Who's behind the company?" the Rio Kid asked.

Donner shrugged massive shoulders. "Time and again we've tried to get an answer to that, and we hit a box canyon every time. Here's another puzzle. Why is the Consolidated interested in claims that any prospector would pass by without a second look?"

The men became quiet, thoughtful. Duggan rolled a cigarette and frowned deeply. Tex Adams leaned against the cell door, a worried look in his eyes as he watched the two famous renegade tamers.

The Rio Kid finally sighed and shook his head.

"The way yuh name it, Donner, it all adds up. Are the strikes in Hamilton all that I've heard they are?"

Donner shook his head slowly. "Silver's here, but it ain't a bonanza—like the Comstock. I've heard the diggin's'll play out before long."

Bob Pryor nodded toward the noisy street. "Sounds busy now—like she'd last forever."

"Hamilton will be here after the silver's gone," Donner answered. "It's on a main east-west road. The biggest strike's on Treasure Hill. Old Colonel Hamilton, who named the town, spread rumors to sell land in this district. And he got out wealthy."

"Other than that, Hamilton has little mineral wealth?" the Rio Kid asked again.

"That's the way she stands, and I've asked geologists who are supposed to know. Assayers, too."

The Rio Kid, pacing back and forth in the cramped quarters, stopped at the barred window and stared outside.

"Let me check on what yuh want, Donner," he said, "and the mystery under the surface. Here's a boom town, built up falsely by a real estate promoter. There's silver, but not near enough to make a man with ore savvy get excited. It can't last. Yet Jed Harker is buyin' up or stealin' these claims and turnin' 'em over to Consolidated Hamilton. Yuh want to know why and yuh want to know who's behind Consolidated."

"That's it," Donner agreed. "Duggan handles the rough work. He gets Colt Barlow and Jed Harker watchin' him. While they're worryin' about Duggan, you find out what yuh can."

"Suppose I'm able to come out in the open and break up the ring?" the Rio Kid suggested. "Yuh'd want that?"

Donner pounded his knee with his fist. "Smash 'em! The quicker the combine's broke up, the sooner honest men can work in Hamilton."

"Where do I stand in this deal," Tex Adams asked uncomfortably. He grinned at the Rio Kid. "Shucks, it makes me plumb nervous to tote a badge in front of Duggan and the Rio Kid."

"Duggan, as a special marshal, will work with you," Donner said, "but he'll move independent if he wants. Hal Telow, yore deputy, must know about this. Only Silver Smith, his daughter, and us in this room know about Captain Pryor, so yuh'd better tell Hal, Tex. Other than that, keep his identity quiet, Savvy?"

TEX nodded and Donner arose.

"Well, I reckon we've just about settled things. Pryor, let me know what progress yuh make, but none of us will interfere."

"Thanks." The Rio Kid nodded. "That gives me a better chance to work."

"I'll post yore bail, Pryor," Donner said, as he moved out of the cell. "Ransdale will probably fine yuh pretty heavy. But he's the least dangerous of all Harker's ring. I expect yuh'll be in danger most of the time, especially if Harker gets wind of who yuh are and what yuh're up to. Good luck."

The Rio Kid smiled. He turned to Tex.

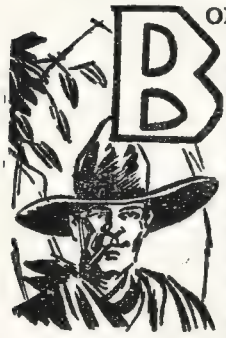
"How about them guns of mine? I have a feelin' I'm goin' to need 'em before long."

In a short while the Rio Kid moved along the street, temporarily a free man. Celestino paced beside him and both kept their hands close to their guns.

The busy street looked peaceful, but evil stirred behind the scenes, greedy hands reached out to place everything in the power of a ruthless gun boss. But Renegade rule and the Rio Kid could not exist together in the same district. One or the other had to go.

CHAPTER IV

Show-down



BOB PRYOR and Celestino Mireles rented a room in one of the town's better hotels. Their windows overlooked Main Street and they could see the building where Jed Harker had his headquarters. The lower floor was occupied by one of the many saloons, and Jed's offices were just above it.

For three days the Rio Kid did little except prowl around the town. But the knowledge gained was well worth the time spent. He soon knew every street, the location of most of the claims in the surrounding pine-covered hills. And he soon learned at which saloons Colt Barlow and his gunhawks loafed when not on some nefarious job.

Harker owned most of the saloons. He took tribute from those he didn't. The Rio Kid knew that, because he spent one whole morning trailing a collector and the two gunmen who backed up his demands.

Twice Pryor saw "Nevada" Unger, but the man avoided him. And the Rio Kid planned no move until he faced the judge on the charges that Harker had brought.

Duggan's first day brought him to the town's attention. He pistol-whipped three men, jailed them, and ran a fourth out of town. Wherever the Rio Kid went he heard talk of the new special deputy marshal.

But "Colt" Barlow would not stand idly by and let Duggan, Adams or any lawman tear down his organization. The man would strike back, and he would do it without warning.

The Rio Kid met Tex Adams in a small saloon near the jail. The young lawman had a new set to his jaw, a new confidence that worried the Rio Kid. Tex was brave and unflinching, but plainly this new attitude came from seeing the renegades reel under the heavy blows that Martin Duggan gave them.

"The lid is about to blow off," the Rio Kid said suddenly as he stood beside Tex at the bar, startling the young marshal.

"Yuh've heard somethin'," he accused.

"Heard nothin'." Bob Pryor shook his head. "But I can read the signs. The gunhawks are playin' true to form. Duggan hit 'em hard and sudden and they ain't had a chance to get their breath. They'll strike back."

Adams shrugged, relieved. "Let 'em. I've been waitin' for somethin' like that."

"I'd like to see the fun," the Rio Kid said. "Yore badge will attract it. Mind if I trail close to yuh for a while?"

Tex laughed. "I'll try to give yuh a show."

"I think yuh will," the Rio Kid grunted.

A man came through the swing doors. He was short and walked with a nervous jerkiness. His lips were pursy in a round, almost baby-like face. Dark eyes shifted restlessly, never quite directly meeting a look fair and square. He wore a gun, and a deputy's badge was pinned to his checkered shirt. Tex Adams nodded a greeting.

"Meet my deputy, Hal Telow," he said to the Rio Kid. "He's a good man."

The Rio Kid shook hands. Telow's grip was limp and unpleasantly moist. He murmured some conventional words of greeting, his eyes avoiding the Rio Kid's scrutiny.

"Hal," Tex said pleasantly, "this is Bob Pryor, a mighty good man to have around in a tight. Yuh probably have heard of him—the Rio Kid."

Telow's eyes widened and for a second rested directly on Pryor's face. Then they slid away and he smiled crookedly.

"We shore got badge toters in town. There's Tex and me, but we're the small fry. Martin Duggan and you should clean up the place in no time."

"I'm unknown as yet," the Rio Kid said stiffly. "Tex will explain. I want to stay that way."

"Shore." Telow nodded. "I reckon it's none of my business." He turned to Tex. "There's a little trouble down at the Treasure Saloon. Some of them hardcases is doin' heavy drinkin' and talkin' about what they're goin' to do to the new marshal."

Tex hitched up his gunbelt. "We might as well take care of that before she starts."

He finished his drink, smiled at the Rio Kid and turned from the bar.

"Hadn't yuh better wait till them sidewinders start somethin'?" Pryor asked.

"I'll not give 'em the chance. I'll bust 'em up and if any of 'em tries gunplay, I'll jug 'em," Tex said confidently. "I been achin' for a chance like this."

AS HE pushed out into the street Pryor looked at Telow, who shrugged, then slipped out himself. Celestino frowned as he leaned gracefully against the bar.

"General, thees one he's loco, no? Trouble, she's always come but thees Tex, he go out the way to find her. *Por Dios*, that is crazee!"

"Yeah, crazy," the Rio Kid answered wor-

riedly, then jerked his head toward the door. "Let's side the button in case he bites off more'n he can chew."

The two left the saloon and pushed their way through the crowd toward the Treasure. It was one of the big places of Hamilton, gaudily decorated, patronized by the high-flying gambling fraternity and the shady gentry who had successfully, so far, preyed on the gullible.

Celestino started up the steps but the Rio Kid stopped him.

"Wait. Tex is just comin' out of the jail. He must have stopped to check his guns."

The Rio Kid and Celestino waited to one side of the wide doorway. Tex Adams had strapped on another gun-belt and he approached the Treasure with a swagger. The Rio Kid's lips set in a thin, disapproving line. He hoped Tex wouldn't get killed learning his lesson.

Tex had eyes and thoughts only for the Treasure and he didn't even see the Rio Kid as he pushed in the swing doors. Bob Pryor touched Celestino's arm and the two walked into the saloon.

The room was immense. To one side was a long bar, heavily lined with customers. Four rows of game tables took up the other side of the room and the air was filled with the subdued click of chips, low tense voices that called for cards or cursed the goddess Luck as other hands raked in the pot.

The Rio Kid saw Tex push through the crowd toward the far end of the bar where a group of men were listening to a red-headed giant who spoke forcefully, his stabbing finger accenting his words. The Rio Kid couldn't hear what he said, but from the angry looks on the wolf faces that surrounded him, it was war talk.

Every man of the group was well-armed, some with two guns. Thin lips snarled back in stubbled faces as the big man spoke, and hard eyes glittered with killer light.

Tex Adams headed straight for them, one man against a dozen lead slingers who needed only the slightest excuse to explode into deadly action.

The Rio Kid shoved through the crowd. Celestino worked to one side so that he and Pryor could more easily cover the gunhawks. Tex Adams had halted before the group and the men were held for the moment by sheer surprise.

"Hamilton don't like gunmen no more, gents," Tex said in clipped tones. "Break up yore palaver and get out of town."

The red-headed giant stared at Tex, then looked around at his men.

An old scar on one cheek puckered up a corner of his lips into a permament sneer. Green flecks mottled his cold gray eyes that glittered under thin red eyebrows. His large nose had been broken. His whole face indicated his utter ruthlessness.

"We ain't good boys," he said slowly, with

The Rio Kid sent a hail of lead down, and two men in the van dropped under his deadly slugs
(CHAPTER XVII)

infinite sarcasm. "We don't go to Sunday School and we chaw tobaccy. So we ain't good enough for Hamilton, says the marshal."

Tex flushed but waited for them to break up, his confidence unabated. Colt Barlow laughed nastily and faced Tex.

"Badge-toter, we aim to stay right here. We aim to move around as we please when we please. Martin Duggan has been proddin' us some but he ain't goin' to last. Neither are you. Now if yuh think yuh can move us out, just slap leather and start smokin'. We're waitin'."

The gunhawks started circling out from the bar, tense, ready for flaming action. It was then that Tex Adams realized the trap into which he had walked. The lesson of over-confidence was driven home with powerful force, but he couldn't back down.

The Rio Kid saw some of the color drain from his face.

His glance cut around the circle, as for the first time he realized the number of guns he had to face.

The Rio Kid still kept to the background, alert, hands taloned over the matched sixes at his hips. Celestino waited, silent and ready, brown eyes flashing.

Neither Tex nor Colt Barlow and his men had noticed the two fighting men at the edge of the crowd.

SILENCE held the big room and those at the bar pressed back out of the line of fire.

The chips had stopped clicking at the distant tables. Colt Barlow stood with his back to the bar, on his coarse face an assured, triumphant grin.

"Well, why don't yuh run us out, lawman?" His voice cut through the silence like a whiplash.

"I'll do just that, polecat," Tex said quietly.

Barlow's eyes flicked around to his men. They had worked into a half-circle around Tex and the lawman would go down at the first burst of gunfire.

Barlow's grin widened and his fingers spread out over his gun handle.

The Rio Kid spoke quietly.

"It ain't all yore way, Barlow. Tex has a couple of backers in this game."

Barlow's glance shot to the Rio Kid. He saw a lithe, tense figure, a man who waited to snatch two blazing guns from their holsters. He saw Celestino beyond Tex Adams.

The young lawman threw Pryor a swift, grateful glance.

One of the renegades stared hard at the man in blue.

He spoke in an awed tone.

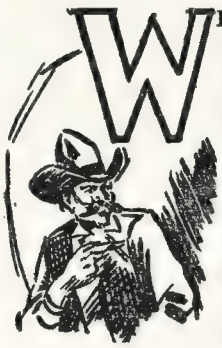
"Colt! That's—the Rio Kid!"

Barlow's eyes widened, then narrowed. His jaw snapped into a rocky crag.

"Blast him!" he yelled, and his hand dropped down to his six.

CHAPTER V

Council of War



WITH blasting roars, Colts exploded in the Treasure Saloon. The Rio Kid's draw had been a dazzling blur of fingers and guns. His sixes rocked, spitting a leaden challenge to the renegades. Barlow's slug passed within a fraction of an inch of the Rio Kid's ear. The man had fired with too much haste. Then Colt Barlow flinched and spun half-around as heavy lead slammed into his shoulder. He dropped his six and grabbed his shoulder.

Crouching, the Rio Kid sent a steady stream of bullets across the room. A gunman sagged in the middle, a second had his legs shot out from under him. Tex Adams fired with steady precision and Celestino played havoc with the renegades.

The battle was swift and hard and terrible. Five men were down in almost as many seconds. Through the heavy pall of smoke, the Rio Kid glimpsed Colt Barlow slipping along the bar. He snapped a shot at the man and saw splinters break from the wood at Barlow's shoulders, but he jumped and reached a distant door.

Tex grunted and his gun arm went limp. A hot brand scorched across the Rio Kid's sleeve. A man screamed, then choked. And suddenly the crash of guns halted. The gunslammers had faded away, overwhelmed by the deadly fire of the lawmen.

A bellowed roar sounded at the doors and the Rio Kid whirled around, sixes dropped to line on the new attack. He straightened. Martin Duggan stormed in, battle lights flashing in his dark Irish eyes. He pulled up short when he saw the trio. His glance dropped to the floor and the sprawled figures that lay there.

"It must have been a nice party," he said. "It sounded like the Civil War had started again."

The Rio Kid reloaded his sixes and shoved them back in leather. His face held grim, harsh lines.

"It was the first battle, Martin. It came before we were ready for it."

He turned to Tex Adams who held his arm tightly. Blood oozed from between the fingers and the young marshal's face was pale. The Rio Kid ripped open the sleeve and examined the wound. He smiled reassuringly at Tex.

"The bullet passed through clean. Missed the bone, though yuh're bleedin' like a stuck pig. When a sawbones patches that up it'll be all right in a few days."

Tex spoke with difficulty. "I reckon I pulled a loco play, Pryor. I was so shore of what Tex

Adams could do, I didn't figger he could be downed by outlaw lead. It was as fool a play as a man could pull."

"Don't let it bother yuh," the Rio Kid said quietly. "Now yuh've had yore lesson and I bet yuh ain't goin' to forget it. Shucks, all of us pull somethin' like that when we first start out. Some of us land in Boot Hill, the rest of us become better lawmen."

"I reckon I'd be down there on the floor now if yuh hadn't backed me with yore sudden sixes," Tex answered.

Martin Duggan took over and order was quickly restored. The dead were carted off and the wounded taken to the sawbones. They would land in jail and Duggan promised them a personal escort out of town. Tex went to the sawbones and the Rio Kid, Celestino and Duggan headed for Donner's store.

"I'm known now," the Rio Kid explained, "and that changes all the plans. I reckon we'd better hold a war council and decide on a new line of attack."

The Donner store was crowded as usual, but the crowd made way for the three men. The story of the gunfight at the Treasure had spread quickly and already the Rio Kid could see that opinion was divided. Some scowled, others smiled in a friendly fashion.

The Rio Kid was told that Donner could be found at Silver Smith's home.

Silver Smith lived in a rambling frame house on the edge of the town. The house sat back among big trees and the wide veranda promised cool comfort on summer evenings.

The Rio Kid knocked on the door and a girl opened it, a girl so beautiful that for a moment the Rio Kid could not find his tongue. The top of her dark head was on a level with Bob Pryor's broad shoulders.

Her face was tanned and the clear, wide gray eyes were a startling contrast to the straight black brows and bronzed skin. Her nose was straight and her lips were generous and friendly. The neat, plain house dress she wore could not conceal the lines of a well-developed figure.

The Rio Kid swept off his hat. "Is Mr. Donner here?"

"Yes, he is." The girl's glance flashed to Celestino and Martin Duggan. She smiled, disclosing even, beautiful teeth. "It looks important. Come in."

THE three lawmen entered the house and the girl indicated a door off a short hall. The Rio Kid walked into a wide living room. Jeremiah Donner faced the door and a smaller, white-haired man stood at the fireplace. Donner's big square face looked startled when he saw Celestino and Martin with the Rio Kid, and the grim look on their faces.

"Somethin's happened!" he exclaimed.

Briefly the Rio Kid told of the gunfight in the Treasure Saloon. The girl had quietly entered. She stood just inside the door, watching the Rio Kid, hanging breathlessly on every word he spoke.

"Someone of that gunhung crew knew me," the Rio Kid said, with a shrug. "That means I can't operate undercover any more. I don't think that's too important, but I wanted yuh to know how things stand."

Donner thrust his hands deep in his trousers pockets, paced to a window and stared unseeingly out for a moment. Then turned and faced Smith.

"Silver, yuh might tell Mr. Pryor yore news."

The old man grinned. "It ain't as important as his. I'm shore pleased that Colt Barlow had his first defeat. He won't be so ready to tromp on people after this. But William Sharon is coming to Hamilton." He looked expectantly at the Rio Kid.

"Sharon?" Pryor asked, puzzled. "I never heard of him."

Smith chuckled. "That's likely, seeing yuh ain't a minin' man. Sharon's a financier and a big one, known all over the United States. He's one of the big frogs over at Virginia City and I reckon he could make Hamilton if he wanted."

"We want him to put money into the mines here, Pryor," Donner said. "It'll mean a lot of business. But he won't if the deal looks shaky. Jed Harker and Colt Barlow stand in the way."

"Yuh want quick action then?" the Rio Kid asked thoughtfully.

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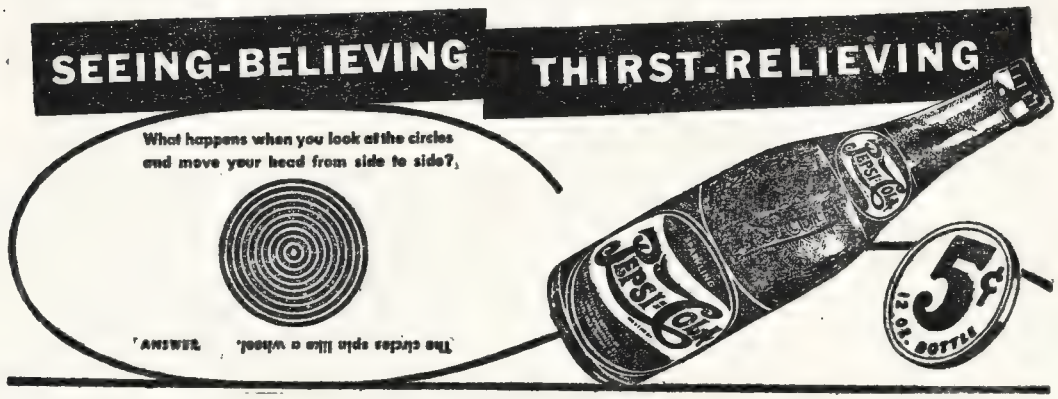


"That's it," Donner agreed. "If we can jail Colt or drive him and his killers out, and if we can break Harker and the mysterious gent behind him, then Hamilton investments will look mighty good to Sharon."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "That's a mighty large program yuh got there, Donner. So far, we don't know a thing about Harker, and we've only had a single brush with Barlow. That gent is a long way from bein' beaten."

Silver Smith sighed deeply and nodded his agreement with the Rio Kid. His shrewd, wise eyes thoughtfully rested on Donner, who clearly showed his impatience. Smith spoke at last, slowly, as though thinking his way aloud.

"Sharon has seen Virginia City at its worst and it didn't seem to bother him. Of course, over there law and order was on the march and outlaws were havin' a hard time. Mebbe Sharon saw they wouldn't last. He could see that here if we went for Barlow's hide and made Hamilton hot for Jed Harker."

"I'm sure Mr. Pryor could do it!" the girl suddenly exclaimed. All eyes jerked to her in surprise and she flushed. "I—excuse me—it just came out."

The Rio Kid laughed and Silver Smith chuckled. "Betty, yuh shore marked the trail. My daughter, gents, and a gal with a heap of savvy. How about it, Jeremiah?"

"Open warfare?" Donner asked doubtfully.

"Why not?" Duggan growled. "It's the only thing them polecats savvy. A six-gun, a knife or a fist speaks mighty plain to them."

A knock sounded on the outer door and Betty hurried to answer it. The men in the room heard her cheery greeting. Then Tex Adams came in, his arm in a sling, and grinning.

"I heard yuh was here. Barlow's nursin' a bad shoulder, mad as a Tartar. I understand Jed Harker is goin' to Judge Ransdale, figgerin' on having the Rio Kid and Celestino arrested. I reckon Martin and me, being lawmen, makes Jed draw the line."

Donner whistled softly and Silver Smith looked worried. The Rio Kid smiled.

"Tex," he said softly, "I reckon yuh got a couple of more deputies as of early this mornin'. Yuh can return the papers when Ransdale sends 'em to yuh."

SMITH slapped his knee and laughed.

"That's quick thinkin'! But what are we doin' about Barlow?"

The Rio Kid, tall, lithe and handsome, stood against the fireplace and spoke with a quiet incisiveness. He didn't see Betty Smith's shining eyes as she watched every move. But Tex did. He stared unbelievingly at the girl then his sharp glance cut to the Rio Kid. His smile lost something of its warmth and there was a troubled look in his eyes.

"So we won't give Barlow a chance to get set," the Rio Kid continued. "Martin, wherever one of his gunhawks even looks like he intends to start trouble, jail him or run him out of town. Any loafers yuh find, arrest 'em on vagrancy charges. That'll hit Colt hard and Jed Harker won't like it. They'll make some move and I reckon we'll all be ready for 'em."

"Yore trial's tomorrow, Pryor," Donner said. Count on trouble from Judge Ransdale."

"We'll take care of that when it comes," the Rio Kid said. "Well, I reckon that covers everything, so I'll be leavin'. I'll see yuh at the jail, Martin, and you, Tex."

He shook hands around and was hardly aware of Betty Smith's tense look at him. But Tex saw it and a fleeting scowl passed over his face. Then the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles were gone.

CHAPTER VI

Blind Justice

LONG before the judge appeared on the bench the next morning, the crude, bleacherlike seats had been filled. Colt Barlow was present, his shirt bulging with a bandage at the shoulder. Jed Harker sat next to him, his cruel face set in determined lines. Back of them, a couple of benches were lined with men who wore their guns tied low, and their eyes were restless, suspicious.

A young man who leaned against the barrier that separated the audience from the court officials had thick black hair swept back from a high forehead. His keen eyes were alert to catch every movement in the room, every expression. His big nose seemed to quiver with excitement and his mobile lips were quick to smile.

Silver Smith and Betty came in the door. Instantly the black-haired young man's wide smile broke out and he waved a long arm in an imperative signal to come down to his bench. They hurried forward and Silver grabbed the young man's hand and pumped it vigorously.

"Shucks, it's been two years since I saw yuh, Sam. That was over in Virginia City. What yuh doin' down this way?"

"My paper sent me for some special articles on Hamilton," the young man answered. His brilliant eyes rested on the girl.

"Betty," said her father, "this is Sam Clemens, but the full handle is Samuel L. Clemens. He's got another name he uses now and then —Mark Twain. He can write the gol-durndest biggest windies yuh can throw yore rope on in a month of Sundays."

Clemens laughed, a booming sound, and bowed over the girl's hand.

"Your father does me an injustice, Miss Betty. It's more than you can rope in three months of Sundays."

They sat down and waited for the trial to begin. Soon Jeremiah Donner came bustling down the aisle to sit beside Smith. He looked pleased.

"I got Burton to defend the Rio Kid," he whispered.

Smith nodded, also pleased, and introduced Donner to Sam Clemens.

"I've heard of you, sir," Clemens said.

"Thanks. Say, I hear another Comstock man is comin' our way. William Sharon."

"Do you know why?" Clemens asked quickly, as though he scented a story.

"Investments in our silver, I reckon," Donner replied.

"I'm speaking confidentially," Clemens said in a low tone. "But if Bill Sharon is coming, lock up your money and mine claims. You won't have either long if you don't."

Donner and Smith swung around in surprise.

"Say," Donner exclaimed, "Sharon's a big man! He put Comstock on the map and shares in them mines over there cost more money than I got right now!"

Clemens shrugged. "Sure he put Comstock on the map. But it's *his* Comstock. It used to belong to a lot of little fellows like you and old Silver here. Just keep in mind what I said and watch Bill Sharon like a chicken watches a hawk."

A side door opened and Tex Adams appeared. The Rio Kid and Celestino came in at his heels and took seats at one of the tables inside the barrier. A competent, shrewd young man followed and placed a few thick law books before him on the table. Then he started whispering to Captain Pryor.

In another moment Nevada Unger came swaggering down the aisle and pushed open the barrier's swing gate. He gave Jed Harker a wink, sneered at the Rio Kid and sprawled in a chair at another table. A squint-eyed attorney followed him.

Judge Neptune Ransdale appeared and everyone stood up. The judge carefully placed his bulk in the deep chair behind the bench and peered myopically at the room. He stroked his straggly mustache and banged with his gavel.

"City of Hamilton versus Robert Pryor, alias the Rio Kid."

He accented the "alias" and glared at the Rio Kid. His watery blue eyes snapped to the squint-eyed attorney.

"Mr. Cullen, you may state the plaintiff's case."

CULLEN arose, rubbing bony, knuckled hands as though he washed them in invisible water. His voice was oily.

"Your Honor, this case is typical of the lawless attitude of the riffraff that has recently come to Hamilton. Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, is a lawless bully, ready to pick a fight, eager to wreck his spite on good citizens such as Mr. Unger."

"I object!" Bryant interrupted. "Mr. Cullen is stating his private opinion, unproven, and derogatory to my client."

Ransdale banged the gavel and glared at Bryant.

"Objection overruled," he snapped. "I reckon any man in Nevada Territory has a right to his thoughts, and I reckon there's free speech."

Bryant came half out of his seat in anger and then caught himself. He sank back and Cullen's thin, mean lips broke in a crooked smile. He called Nevada Unger to the stand.

Under Cullen's expert guidance, he told his twisted story. Bob Pryor's lean face darkened as Nevada inserted sly remarks intended to tear down character. Time and again Bryant objected, each time overruled by the Honorable Neptune Ransdale.

Jed Harker beamed at the judge. Colt Barlow's grin was one of triumphant mockery.

"We're licked," the Rio Kid whispered to Bryant.

"It's a travesty," Bryant snapped. "Ransdale is Harker's man but I never dreamed he'd be this open about it. Still, I'm going to fight it out."

The Rio Kid grinned and nodded.

"You'll do, Bryant. I like a fighter, whether he uses law books or six-guns."

Cullen called up a dozen of Harker's gunmen. Bryant worked himself hoarse objecting in vain. Each man confirmed Nevada's claim that the Rio Kid had deliberately broken into a peaceful discussion and sought a fight with Nevada. The last witness was a white-browed, whiny-voiced man who claimed he knew the Rio Kid's past record.

"He's always caused trouble," he answered Cullen's question. "I've heard of ruckuses he's been in all over the West. He was a wanted outlaw in Leadville."

"That's a cussed lie!" Martin Duggan's loud, angry bellow sounded from the rear of the room. "Lawless renegades took over Leadville for a while and their fake outlaw sheriff posted a reward for the Rio Kid. But as soon as the right people got back in power, the whole thing was dropped. It was the Rio Kid's fighting that saved Leadville, too!"

Judge Ransdale pounded the bench hard with his gavel.

"I'll have silence in this hearing. Duggan, I fine you ten dollars for contempt of court."

Duggan swaggered up the aisle and pushed through the barrier. He glared at Cullen as deliberately he peeled off three ten-dollar bills and placed them before Ransdale.

"Judge, I got three times the contempt for this court that yuh think I have. That'll about cover it."

He walked away before Ransdale could get his breath. A dead silence held the audience and it broke in a sudden gale of wild laughter. Ransdale's face turned brick red and he pounded with the gavel furiously, trying to shout for order above the roars of laughter.

That laughter finally died away to muffled gurgles and Ransdale huffily ordered Cullen to proceed with the trial after he had fruitlessly searched for Duggan in the courtroom.

"He's a trouble-maker, clear through," the shifty witness repeated. "He raised a ruckus at Corinne and killed a heap of folks. And he was in some devilment in Silver City down in New Mexico."

"You know the defendant?" Cullen asked silkily.

"Shore. I was in Arzolana when he had the whole countryside with a tail holt. He even roused the 'Paches down that way and it took the sojers to straighten things out."

"That will be all," Cullen said. He turned and smiled at Bryant. "It's your case, sir."

Bryant glared at him and arose. He called the Rio Kid to the stand. He tried to establish the reasons why Bob Pryor had fought with Nevada Unger but Cullen's objection—sustained by Ransdale—made the truth difficult to bring out.

Bryant called for Cramer, but the man did not answer.

THE call was repeated and again there was no answer. Cullen sat easily in his chair, steepling his bony fingers and beaming at Bryant. The defense attorney gave him and Harker a suspicion-filled glance, then called Celestino Mireles. Instantly Cullen was on his feet.

"Your Honor, I object to this witness. He's obviously a Mexican and his words aren't worth the breath it takes to say them."

The Rio Kid jumped to his feet, eyes blazing. Celestino sat paralyzed, the slanderous slur striking him speechless for the moment. The Rio Kid approached Cullen, paying no heed to Ransdale's gavel-pounding. Pryor's strong fingers taloned into Cullen's coat and he pulled the man close.

Cullen squawked in fear and his eyes grew terrified.

"One more remark like that, Mr. Lawyer," the Rio Kid gritted, "and I'll take yuh apart. Celestino is a man to ride the river with, braver than you, or Nevada, or the whole lot of the sneaking curs over there beyond the rail. Apologize to him, Mr. Lawyer."

"Sit down!" Ransdale thundered from the bench.

The Rio Kid turned. "Judge, yuh can save yore voice. I'll sit down when this buzzard has apologized to a heap better man than he'll ever be. Speak up, Lawyer, or the whole shape of yore face will be changed!"

Cullen tried to wriggle free from the Rio Kid's grip, but couldn't. He threw a look of appeal to Jed Harker, but the angry boss made no move to help his pawn. Then Cullen saw the determined look in the eyes of the infuriated Rio Kid.

"I—I guess I'm sorry."

"Guess!" the Rio Kid snapped. He shoved Cullen before Celestino. "Make up yore mind and say it loud and clear before I plumb lose my temper."

Cullen reddened. "I'm sorry, Mr. Mireles. I—I spoke hastily."

The Rio Kid sent the gangly lawyer spinning back to his table where he sat down with a bone-shaking thump. The Rio Kid faced the judge.

"This is the poorest excuse for justice I've seen anywhere, and I've covered a heap of country! There's no use buckin' a cold deck such as this. I plead guilty. But before yuh pass sentence, let me tell yuh some cold, hard truth."

"You will address the court civilly or not at all!" Ransdale blustered.

"I'll address a sneaking, hired henchman any way I please, Ransdale. Justice is not only blind in yore court—she's deaf, dumb and idiotic."

"Fifty dollars contempt of court!" Ransdale gasped.

The Rio Kid grinned.

"Judge, I ain't got enough money to cover the contempt I got. Duggan was luckier than me there. You was appointed to your place to give every man a square and even break. It's shore plain that yuh have an itchy palm and an even break don't even enter yore mind. The Territory officials will hear about this court. I'll see to that. I've fought injustice and greed all over the West. Ransdale, I shore don't intend to let yuh escape."

Judge Ransdale's eyes shifted to Jed Harker. He seemed to gain courage enough to realize that, after all, he was the judge. He snapped his gavel down.

"I fine you one hundred dollars, and sixty days in jail for disturbing the peace. I intend to make an example of you, Pryor. I also fine you one hundred dollars and sixty days in jail for the slurs you have cast on the integrity of this court. Let that be a lesson to you."

The Rio Kid hooked his thumbs in his gunbelts.

His face showed the angry turmoil of his thoughts.

"I'll pay the fine imposed by the court on both charges," he said quietly, though his voice carried to the farthest corner of the room, "but I shore protest even that. The whole thing has been illegal from start to finish. Yuh let Unger and Harker's men tell their stories and yuh shore put a gag on Mr. Bryant here when he tried to bring out the truth. Yuh helped Cullen object to everything I said and yuh helped discredit my witnesses. Judge, I'm not goin' to jail!"

RANSDALE stared at the Rio Kid as if he couldn't quite believe his ears. The newspaperman, Mark Twain, scribbled hasty notes and shrewdly watched the judge. Ransdale's slack lips abruptly set stubbornly.

"You're causing yourself trouble, Pryor. The

WILLIAM P. SHARON

HE WAS ONE of the financial giants of the famous Comstock Lode at Virginia City, and probably one of the cleverest operators of mining stocks and controls that Nevada ever knew.

He was born in Ohio, in 1821. He was well-educated and had a thorough training in law, which he practiced for a while in St. Louis. Then, for a time, he had a small retail business in Illinois.

The gold rush of 1849 caught him up and William Sharon went to Sacramento, California. He quickly discovered that the hard work of pick and gold pan were not for him. He opened up a store, but it was destroyed in a flood. He moved to San Francisco and made a fortune in real estate.

He lost his money in wild speculation in Comstock mining shares, but interested the head of the Bank of California in his ability. The bank sent Sharon to the Comstock on a business deal. He handled it so well, and made so much money, that the bank made him its representative in Virginia City.

Sharon's rise was fast. Thinking only of the dollars to be made, he engaged in a piratical fight for control of the mines. He was practically King of the Comstock for ten years. He manipulated stock, fought savagely for financial control, never thinking of business ethics. He had other interests over Nevada and was a secret power in the State capital at Carson City.

He retired from the Comstock and satisfied another urge for social prominence. His parties for the California-Nevada great were dazzling affairs. He died in 1885.

Law in Hamilton will see to it that you go to jail and serve your sentence."

"Mebbe," the Rio Kid answered. His long finger pointed straight at the judge. "But savvy this before yuh make any more moves. Order me locked up and I go peaceful. But Mr. Bryant will shore take this to the State Appeal Courts and this whole rotten mess will be reviewed. The governor will savvy what kind of a judge is down here. How long do yuh think yuh'll last?"

He returned to the table and picked up his hat. Then he looked back up at the bench and grinned.

"I'm leavin', Judge. Tex will arrest me if yuh give the word. But remember what happens. . . . Celestino, let's travel. This place smells more like a skunk's den every minute."

As he walked to the barrier, Celestino followed.

Judge Ransdale lifted his gavel, then caught Jed Harker's worried glanced. Harker shook his head slightly.

Ransdale's heavy face reddened and he replaced the gavel.

The door slammed behind the Rio Kid and Celestino.

CHAPTER VII

Seed of Discord

JED HARKER'S office showed his success. It was an enormous room and everything in it was large and rich. The roll-top desk carried heavy scroll work, the carpet had a huge red flower design. Chairs and tables were costly, but in bad taste. Pictures were barroom art—loud, large and startling. Three men gathered there after the trial. Colt Barlow sat grinning at Ransdale who was a picture of anger and chagrin. He stretched out his legs, winced with the sudden twinge of his shoulder wound, and a look of hate wiped off his smile. His red hair seemed to bristle.

Judge Ransdale's grossly fat body still trembled with his fury. His watery blue eyes sparked and his red nose twitched. On a table close to his hand was whiskey from Jed Harker's private stock. As the judge poured a long drink his thick, slack lips mumbled threats and oaths.

"Curse you, Jed!" he finally broke out. "Why did you stop me? I should have had that Rio Kid thrown in jail for a year! I'm the laughing stock of the town."

Harker sat immobile behind his desk, eyes narrowed in unpleasant thought. He stirred a little at the judge's outbreak.

"Don't be a fool, Nep. He had yuh dead to rights and yuh know it."

Ransdale sputtered, then hastily gulped more whiskey.

"But to force a showdown right there in public! Adams is his friend, but he'd have followed my orders because I'm the judge."

"Shut up," Jed Harker said quietly.

Ransdale's mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for water. Then he filled his tumbler again and took another long swig. His fist doubled and he struck the table.

"I'm having that jasper thrown in jail!" he stated flatly.

Harker's chin jutted out. "Nep, yuh're settin' right there and yuh ain't doin' a thing without my orders. That Rio Kid meant exactly what he said. Yuh wouldn't be on the bench a month, and I shore wouldn't have no use for yuh. I don't waste time with folks who can't help me, Nep."

Ransdale paled a little. "But, Jed, you can't let him get away with this."

"I don't intend to." Harker turned his steely look to Colt Barlow and his harsh lips broke in a sneer. "A fine lot of jaspers I got to work with. Both of yuh got whipped when yuh went up against the Rio Kid."

Barlow shrugged. "Mine was bad luck, Boss. He caught me'n the boys by surprise. As soon as this hole in my shoulder closes, I aim to handle the Rio Kid personal."

"I ain't waitin,' Colt." Decision showed in Harker's cruel eyes. "I told Bill Sharon we had this town where we want it. I told him we'd swing all the mine claims to him and there wouldn't be no one to object. Then one man comes to town—just one man—and he's startin' to tear down my work of a year."

"How about Duggan?" Colt asked.

"He's the easiest part of the problem. A well-planned saloon fight and Martin Duggan can be planted in Boot Hill. All he knows is gun and fist. The Rio Kid is the danger point."

"We could work him into a fight," Barlow suggested. "I'd shore like to salivate him."

"Him and that Mexican are always together," Harker went on. "If we could get his friend out of the way the Rio Kid wouldn't be hard to reach. I reckon a knife can slit his hide as easy as the next man's. And we could spread the word the Rio Kid got scared and run out." Harker flicked a cold glance at Barlow. "Have yuh got a man who can handle a knife? Think yuh could arrange to get that Celestino out of the way. It's got to be done quick and sudden."

Barlow straightened and grinned at Harker.

"Leave it to me," he said confidently.

"That's exactly what I'm doin'," Harker grunted, "and I expect yuh to carry out orders. The Rio Kid can't be alive when Sharon gets here, savvy?"

Barlow left the room. He descended to the saloon below and stopped at the bar to order a drink. He stood there a moment, thinking. When he went out into the street he halted and looked toward the hotel where the Rio Kid stayed. He grinned wolfishly as he picked out the windows of the room.

BEHIND those windows, the Rio Kid was listening to the newspaperman from Virginia City. Mark Twain's eyes twinkled and he chuckled at the memory of the trial.

"Captain Pryor, that was the boldest bluff I've seen in many a day. This Judge Ransdale must have a mighty bad conscience to allow you to run a sandy like that."

"That's the way I figgered him." The Rio Kid grinned. "Say, what's William Sharon like? Donner is mighty anxious to have him like Hamilton."

Sam Clemens stopped smiling.

"They're making a mistake," he said soberly. "Bill Sharon is the cold, calculating type. Everything is profit and loss with him. A lot of people at the Comstock hate him."

The Rio Kid looked out the window. "Any idea who's behind the Consolidated Hamilton Company?"

"Harker, for one," Clemens instantly replied. "I don't know who else."

"Could yuh find out?"

"Might. Why?"

The Rio Kid's keen eyes studied Sam Clemens' strong face. He liked what he saw.

"I can trust yuh, Sam," he said. "Donner and Silver Smith asked me to come to Hamilton. Jed Harker has been takin' over everything in sight, or tryin' to. They figger Jed is just a figgerhead for somebody else, somebody interested in the Hamilton mines."

Clemens nodded. "That's an old story in these parts, Captain."

"But this one has some new angles. From all I hear, Hamilton ain't the rich ore deposit that everyone talks. Several men with savvy say the mines can't last. A man smart enough to use Harker as a pawn is smart enough to know exactly how rich the mines are."

"I can see that," Clemens agreed.

"Yet this hombre, whoever he is, still is tryin' to get control of all the diggin's, big and little. Why?"

Clemens sighed. "Pryor, you or I or anyone can go out and dig a hole in the ground. We can call it a silver or gold mine and issue stock for sale all over the country. Some day those laws will be changed, and there won't be a lot of poor people lose their life-savings in wildcat and blue-sky swindles. Hamilton has been boomed as a bonanza. Suppose some smart operator steps in, gets titles to the claims, then pushes the stock in the country's markets?"

"He'd make a heap of *dinero*," the Rio Kid said slowly.

"Millions—if he managed to keep a false boom going until he had unloaded all his holdings."

The Rio Kid jerked his thumb toward the window. "Then yuh think this Consolidated Hamilton might be that sort of an outfit?"

"I don't know," Clemens said frankly. "It might be honest. It might be crooked. But I'm a newsman. I might be able to find out for you."

"Wish yuh would," the Rio Kid agreed. "I wish yuh'd sort of look into Jed Harker, too. Might be best if yuh didn't know me too well when we happen to meet in public."

Clemens grinned and his eyes grew sharp. "I'll make a bargain with you, Captain. I'll help all I can if you'll give me and my paper the exclusive rights to the story, whatever happens."

"My name in a paper!" the Rio Kid exclaimed. "Shucks, no!"

Clemens leaned forward eagerly. "You've got the wrong idea, Pryor. If you break up this ring in Hamilton, clean out the town and make it a decent place to live in, people ought to know about it. Maybe someone reading the account will be prevented from trying Harker's play, or that of the man behind him."

The Rio Kid looked undecided. Celestino, who had been stretched out on the bed, listening, rose to one elbow.

"Thees theeng she sound good, General. Senor Clemens has the right thought."

"All right," the Rio Kid surrendered. "Yuh can have the story. But I shore aim to be far away when it's printed."

Clemens arose and shook hands with the Rio Kid.

"Thanks. I'll see what I can find out about Harker and the mining company. Where will I see you?"

"If yuh're careful, I reckon this room's as good a place as any. I hope yuh get a lead, *amigo. Adios.*"

CLEMENS had not been gone long when someone tapped on the door. Instantly Celestino glided across the room and the Rio Kid stood up, hands close to his guns. The tap came again and they heard the apologetic voice of the clerk.

"There's a lady downstairs to see Bob Pryor. Betty Smith."

"I'll be right down," the Rio Kid said and as the clerk hurried away, Pryor looked puzzled. "Now what does she want to see me about? Is her father in trouble?"

Celestino shrugged expressively. "We find out, no? *Por Dios*, always sometheeng she happen. General, you know w'at I do when I be old man?"

The Rio Kid grinned. "Yuh'll be married, with a dozen little Celestinos running around the *hacienda.*"

"Nevair that!" Celestino exclaimed. "No, I buy myself a *rancho* deep in Sonora. There weel be beeg mountains all around him. No one get in, I can't get out. Then I shall throw away thees guns, thees knife. I leave doors unlocked and I sleep well."

"It'll never happen, *amigo*," the Rio Kid said as he picked up his hat. "You and me will ride the trails until we dry up and blow away, or some renegade bullet puts us in Boot Hill. Yuh can forget that *rancho.*"

"It ees very nice dream," Celestino sighed, and followed the Rio Kid out of the room.

Betty Smith sat demurely in one of the big lobby chairs. She smiled as Bob Pryor and his companion came down the stairs. The Rio Kid hurried to her, questioning concern in his eyes.

"Anything wrong?" he demanded.

"Not at all, Captain Pryor." She looked unusually beautiful. "I would like your company at dinner at our house, you and your friend. Now you can't refuse, Captain Pryor."

The Rio Kid laughed in relief.

"We accept, Miss Smith. Home cookin' is somethin' Celestino and me seldom get. How about it, *amigo?*"

Celestino looked heavenward. "My general, eet will be like paradise, no?"

The three of them left the hotel and walked toward the Smith home. The Rio Kid didn't notice how the girl's eyes sparkled when she looked at him. To him, she was the pretty daughter of an old man who needed his assistance, nothing more.

But Tex Adams saw the trio through the

windows of his small office. He went to the door, staring after them. And again he saw Betty's interest in the tall handsome man in dark blue.

Adams' fist clenched, and a muscle jumped in his lean jaw. When he returned to his desk he found breathing difficult. He frowned blackly at reward dodgers pinned to the wall.

"Shucks, mebbe it don't mean nothing," he muttered. "I reckon Betty can walk with the Rio Kid and still be in love with me."

He sat there for a long time, then arose impatiently and jammed his hat on his head. He walked out to the street and started toward the Smith home, but pulled up short.

"I ain't goin'," he thought stubbornly. "If she wants the Rio Kid instead of me—" He broke off short. "Shucks, I must be loco. Betty wouldn't be like that. But if she is, I'll shore have a showdown with Mr. Rio Kid!"

CHAPTER VIII

Warning Rattle

MIRELES and the Rio Kid had an enjoyable time at Silver Smith's home. The dinner was perfect and two wanderers of the range filled themselves to repletion. The Rio Kid complimented Betty on her cooking and she flushed prettily as she thanked him.

After the meal, old Silver Smith dragged his guests off to the living-room where they talked for the remainder of the evening.

Betty joined them and looked disappointed when she had no chance to talk alone to the Rio Kid.

It was about nine when the Rio Kid and Celestino started back to the hotel. Almost there, Pryor saw a gleam of light from the marshal's office and he crossed the street. He pushed into the little office and halted, eyes widening in surprise.

Tex Adams lay across his desk in a drunken stupor, an empty bottle close by his limp hand. Hal Telow looked up at the Rio Kid. His eyes flicked to the limp figure and he shrugged.

"I never knowed him to do that before. Somethin' shore must have stuck in his craw."

The Rio Kid crossed to the desk and lifted Tex, pushing him back in the chair. A single glance told him that Tex had really taken more than he could handle. The Rio Kid let the young marshal drop back on the desk.

"Yuh'd better get him home and to bed," he told Telow, then changed the subject to ask: "Where is Alf Cramer's claim?"

"Out the west road. Yuh head for Treasure Hill but bear to the right."

"I want to know why he didn't show up at the trial," the Rio Kid said. "Tell Tex I'll be ridin' out there in the mornin' and if anything's wrong, I'll let him know."

"Tex is goin' to be a mighty sick hombre in the mornin'," Telow grunted. "I reckon I can handle things, though."

When the Rio Kid left the jail he shot a questioning glance at Celestino.

"That ain't like Tex from what I've seen of him. What yuh reckon happened?"

"Maybe he's got the love trouble." Celestino shrugged.

"Mebbe."

The Rio Kid grinned.

They crossed to the hotel. As they climbed the steps, a big man was shadowed against the light streaming out the door. He stopped short, then stepped aside, waiting. The Rio Kid saw Jed Harker's hard jaw. He started to brush past the man, but Jed halted him.

"I'd like to talk to yuh, Pryor."

"Layin' a gun trap, Harker?" the Rio Kid asked sharply.

"When I want yuh out of the way, Pryor, I'll do it quietly," Harker snapped back.

"Yuh speak plain anyhow," the Rio Kid acknowledged, his smile tight. "Where do we talk?"

"How about yore room?"

"Celestino, go on up. If we got visitors hidin' in the dark, use yore guns. I'll join yuh pronto."

As Celestino went through the door Jed Harker fished for a cigar and carefully bit off the end. He snapped a match to it and his eyes glittered evilly in the flame. His harsh lips broke in a cruel smile.

"I like a man that's careful, Pryor. You don't make many mistakes. Only one since I been here."

"What was that?" the Rio Kid asked.

"That's what I want to talk about," Harker evaded. He looked over the Rio Kid's shoulder. "Here comes yore Mexican."

"Let's get that settled here and now," the Rio Kid snapped. "Celestino's as good a man as you'll ever be and I'm proud to call him friend."

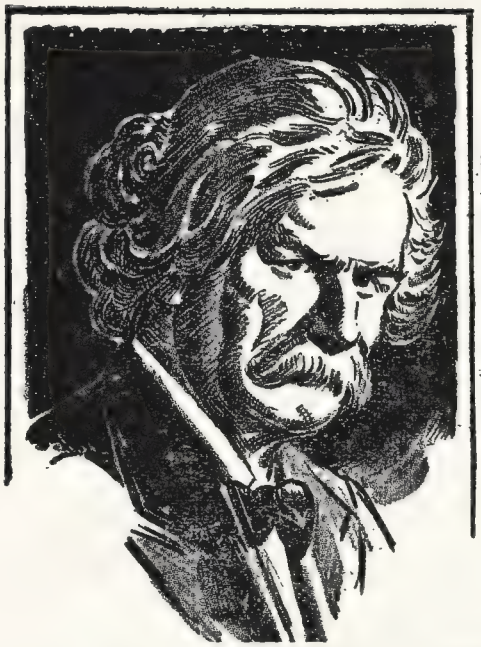
Celestino came out the door.

"There ees no one, General."

"All right, Harker. I'll listen to yore palaver."

The three men went up the stairs. The Rio Kid warily watched the big man. He kicked open the door of his room and motioned Harker in ahead of him. Jed walked boldly into the darkness, then stood still until Celestino lighted the lamp. He glanced around the room with its two beds, washstands and cracked mirror.

"The law badge ain't brought yuh much, it looks like." He sat down ponderously in a chair that squeaked with his weight. "Now I always figger such things before I made a move."



SAMUEL L. CLEMENS [Mark Twain]

THIS GREAT American author was born in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835. The family was large and often hard pressed to meet the necessities of daily life. From 1839 to 1853, Sam lived at Hannibal, Missouri, the locale of many of his better known books, such as "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn."

His father died in 1847 and young Sam Clemens was forced to quit school. He was apprenticed to a printer and thoroughly learned the trade. It gave him an interest in newspapers and books that grew to an urge to write. He was soon employed by his brother on a small newspaper.

From 1853 to 1854 he worked his way to St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia and back to Keokuk, where his brother again employed him on his paper. In 1856 he decided to go to South America, but got only as far as Cincinnati.

This was followed by a period on the steamboats of the Mississippi River, two years of the colorful, roving life that made the background of another famous book. Then his brother became secretary to the Territorial Governor of Nevada and Mark Twain went West with him.

He gave up the political connection to become a reporter on the Virginia City newspaper in 1862, where he adopted his famous pen name, "Mark Twain." In 1864 he went to California where his writing gained state-wide acclaim. His first published book, "The Jumping Frog," used the California locale.

A world traveler, Samuel Clemens became known nationally. He moved fast, working on a paper in Buffalo, New York, and then moving to Hartford, Connecticut, where he lived and wrote for seventeen years, until 1888. He died at Redding, Connecticut, April 21, 1910.

His book, "Roughing It," is recommended to Rio Kid fans for a true and richly humorous picture of Nevada in the 1860s.

THE Rio Kid sat down on the bed while Celestino remained alert and wary by the door. Harker seemed as comfortable as though the two men were his best friends.

"What's on yore mind?" the Rio Kid demanded.

"I've been watchin' yuh here in Hamilton. You and me have had two brushes and I admit my boys came off second best. Yuh beat Colt Barlow and yuh knocked the wind out of old Neptune's sails. Yuh hit hard and fast. I like that."

The Ro Kid's straight brows arched.

"Ain't yuh workin' against yoreself?"

"Mebbe, mebbe no. I give a man credit for what he can do, whether he's on my side of the fence or the other. If he's workin' against me, I try to do somethin' about it."

"Such as?"

Harker studied the end of his cigar. "Well, mainly I hate to see a good man crippled up or dead. It's ability just thrown away. So I try another angle first."

"I'm listenin'," the Rio Kid said grimly.

"That brings me right smack to what I've been wantin' to say to yuh, Pryor. There

ain't no use of you and me fightin' one another. We could get together and both of us would profit."

Harker looked narrowly through the cloud of cigar smoke at the Rio Kid. Pryor showed no expression, one way or the other. He clasped his strong fingers around his raised knee.

"What's the proposition?"

"Well, there's three of 'em. First, I'd like to have you and the senor over there on my side. I'm easy to work for, I don't ask much, and I pay right good. In yore case, I'd be willin' to raise the ante a heap, and throw in a good hunk of *dinero* for Senor Mireles to boot."

"That's the first," the Rio Kid said softly. "What's the second?"

"I try to figger what the other hombre thinks," Harker said smoothly. "I thought mebbe yuh wouldn't want to come over to my side openly. Mebbe yuh'd figger yuh'd be goin' back on them yuh promised to help. So here's the second proposition. It's worth five thousand cold dollars to me if you and the senor saddle up tomorrow and ride out of Hamilton—and never come back."

The Rio Kid's blue eyes gleamed mirthfully. "I like to see all the cards. What's the third?"

Harker's big face twisted in a sorrowful grimace.

"I hoped not to bring it up, Pryor. Say yuh don't take either of them offers I made. There's just one thing left to do. The Hamilton Boot Hill ain't nowhere near full and there's plenty of room for two more graves. Now that would be plumb too bad."

The Rio Kid still lolled easily on the bed and his smile remained. But something grim and determined had crept into his eyes, though his tone remained careless.

"That just about covers all the angles, Harker."

"I'm thorough," Harker answered, with a self-satisfied smirk. "I know what I'm doin' and where I'm goin'."

"Yuh know how to get Celestino and me in Boot Hill if necessary, I suppose."

"Shore. In fact, Pryor, it's already down in the cards unless yuh see things my way on one of the other propositions."

"Yuh're goin' to be a busy man," the Rio Kid chuckled, "so I won't hesitate none. I won't go over to yore side and I won't leave town. But, Harker, yuh made a bad mistake to figger there's just one other way."

Harker puffed on his cigar and looked regretful. Then he arose.

"There ain't no other way, Pryor. Yuh should have been smart."

"Had yuh thought that I might smash you and the man behind yuh? Had yuh figgered you might land in Boot Hill or in jail?"

Harker laughed. "That's loco. I always get what I'm after."

At the Rio Kid's slight signal, Celestino significantly held open the door. Harker smiled crookedly and walked to the entrance. He turned, weighing the Rio Kid with his glance.

"Yuh got a few hours to change yore mind. I hope yuh do."

"Don't bother," the Rio Kid replied. "I'll play my string out as it lays. *Buenos noches.*"

"Good night," Harker answered heavily and faded down the hall.

CELESTINO closed the door and grinned. But the Rio Kid's clean-cut features had grown bleak and determined. He blew out the lamp and went to the window, peered out on the darkened street for a few moments, then slowly turned away.

"He's gone. Celestino, we just got a real declaration of war. Jed Harker is a scalawag and a renegade, but I give him credit for one thing. He shakes his rattles before he strikes."

"He's not run the bluff, General?" Celestino suggested.

"Not him, *amigo.* From now on in we keep our sixes loose in the holsters. Let's turn in. We might have a busy day tomorrow."

Despite Harker's blunt warning the two trail companions slept soundly. They arose early, had breakfast and then went to Tex Adams' house. Hal Telow answered their knock.

"Tex is shore a sick man," Telow said. "He's sober now but Boot Hill looks mighty good to him. Shore, I'll tell him where yuh're goin'."

At the livery stable, the Rio Kid saddled Saber. The dun showed that he was glad to be heading out on the trail again and the Rio Kid grinned as he held the spirited horse in check. Soon he and Celestino rode out of Hamilton, headed for Treasure Hill.

The road to the silver claims was loaded with traffic. Wagons and freighters hauled supplies to the mines.

At last they reached the base of Treasure Hill and found that the trail forked. One led straight ahead, the other swerved to the right, evidently following the base of the hill.

The moment they took the right-hand trail, there was no more traffic. Probably only Cramer's mine was up that way. The trail around the shoulder of the hill would permit the passage of only a single wagon and was bordered by trees and bushes. It abruptly cut to the left and started an almost direct ascent up the hill.

There it turned again and followed a wide ledge that overlooked a brawling stream a hundred feet below. The riders came to a small clearing and rutted tracks led directly across it to plunge into the trees again.

They had reached the edge of the forest when suddenly a light shiver passed down Saber's black stripe. Instantly the Rio Kid pulled the horse to a halt. That shiver always had meant that danger was close, and

the Rio Kid never disregarded it.

Celestino halted, too. The Rio Kid sat straight and silent, listening. No unusual sound came out of the silent stand of trees. The Rio Kid loosened the guns in the holsters and touched Saber's side. Cautiously he rode on down the trail, tense, ready for the trouble that Saber had signaled.

The trees thinned surprisingly, then gave way to a huge cleared space. A small cabin, a pole corral and the raw scar of a tunnel mouth into the side of the hill told the Rio Kid that this was Cramer's place. Saber shivered again. The Rio Kid halted behind a protecting screen of bushes and dismounted. He searched the clearing, keen eyes probing every possible hiding place. He saw no sign of life.

"Cover me," he snapped to Celestino. "Saber keeps tellin' me there's somethin' wrong."

The young Mexican pulled the rifle from its scabbard and worked the lever. He slipped from saddle and took position in the bushes so that he could command the clearing.

CHAPTER IX

Missing Witness

NO SIGNS of life were about the cabin, though the door was open. The Rio Kid stepped out in the open, walking steadily but with hands taloned close to his guns.

When he came closer to the cabin his pace slowed. His eyes cut to the corral, the tunnel entrance, the trees and bushes on the far edge of the clearing. Only drowsy, sunlit silence.

He stepped to the door and peered in. At once he saw the bunk where a man lay tightly bound and gagged. Cramer's eyes watched the Rio Kid with an agonized stare.

The Rio Kid had just let out an amazed curse when he caught a blur at his side and instinctively ducked. A gun-barrel missed his head by a scant inch and the bearded renegade who wielded it whirled, snarling, his six streaking up.

The Rio Kid's hands swept down for his guns. The bearded man fired hurriedly, missed. Instantly Celestino's rifle cracked, a sharp, flat sound. The bearded man came up high on his toes and collapsed.

The Rio Kid had turned his attention to a second man who had run from another room, toward the door. He had plowed to a halt when his companion fell.

He mouthed a curse and snapped a shot at the Rio Kid. It was his last action on earth. The heavy slug from the Rio Kid's six slapped into his chest, driving him back to slide down into a huddled heap on the floor.

The Rio Kid jumped inside the cabin. He ran to Cramer's side, pulling his knife and slashing the ropes that held the man. He cut loose the gag and helped Cramer to his feet. The man moaned and collapsed from the pain of returning circulation. The Rio Kid rubbed his ankles hard to bring the blood back.

"We got to get out of here," Cramer said thickly, as though his tongue was partially paralyzed. "There's a dozen more in the mine. They'll kill."

"Can you walk now?" the Rio Kid asked.

"I think so. Get me that renegade's gun."

The Rio Kid scooped up the weapon. Cramer took a few staggering steps toward the door. He almost fell, then nodded grimly and followed the Rio Kid outside.

They were several yards from the cabin when they heard a shout of alarm from the tunnel.

Celestino's rifle cracked. A man yelped. Others cursed and there came a fusillade of shots. Lead whipped around the Rio Kid's head like buzzing bes. He whirled, and his sixes streaked from leather. As he fired at the bunched men before the tunnel two went down. The others jumped for cover.

"Hit for the trees," the Rio Kid snapped at Cramer.

He ran a zigzag course and Celestino's rifle kept the renegades at the mine from getting in any effective shots until Cramer and the Rio Kid reached the trees.

"Ride with Celestino!" the Rio Kid snapped. "Those gents will be after us. I'll keep 'em busy."

Cramer jumped up behind Celestino. As the Rio Kid swept up Saber's reins and hit leather, gunhawks streamed out of the mine, toward the cabin. Their horses were probably picketed somewhere beyond it. The Rio Kid spoke a few words to Saber and the horse leaped ahead.

Alone, the Rio Kid would have had no worry about outriding the renegades. Saber was one of the fleetest horses in the West. But Celestino's horse carried double and the Rio Kid had to keep the outlaws from recapturing Cramer.

By the time the fleeing men reached the wide ledge, the outlaws were already sending lead whistling around their ears. But the Rio Kid's guns smashed back a deadly answer.

The open ledge was the real danger spot and there the Rio Kid made a stand, letting Celestino and Cramer get across. He threw lead at the flitting outlaws, then reined Saber around. The horse hit the ledge at flashing speed.

An outlaw, armed with a rifle, jumped from the bushes. He knelt and his cold eyes squinted down the sight at the rider in blue. The man's finger tightened on the trigger and the rifle cracked.

The Rio Kid tumbled limply from saddle.

He hit the ground, rolled, then dropped over the rock wall. Saber sped with empty saddle to the shelter of the trees beyond the ledge. The renegades shouted with triumph and swept after the Mexican and the miner.

CELESTINO saw the Rio Kid fall. His dark face twisted in a mask of sorrow and hate. He pulled up his horse and jumped from saddle. He swept the rifle from the scabbard, his face contorted with fury. He caught Saber as the horse came galloping to him.

"Ride, senor!" he yelled to Cramer. "Thees, she is Celestino's vengeance!"

Cramer took one look at the blazing black eyes and galloped away. Celestino led Saber into the bushes and waited until the pursuing outlaws had pounded out of sight in pursuit of the miner.

Cramer would have to use his own wits to elude them.

"And eef my General he is dead—" Celestino gritted between set teeth.

He threw a look of hatred toward Hamilton that promised a blazing end to Harker, Colt Barlow and any other outlaws that the slender Mexican would chance to meet.

When the last echo of the pursuit had died away, Celestino emerged from the bushes. He returned to the ledge, peered down, and saw the sprawled blue figure at the edge of the brook. The Rio Kid had struck a rocky slope and slid down it to another short fall. Then his body had rolled to the edge of the stream.

Celestino's lips set in a harsh line as he started working his way down through the bushes and over the drops.

Finally he reached the bottom and hurried to his friend.

The Rio Kid's face was covered with blood and his eyes were closed when Celestino rolled him over. The Mexican's gently probing fingers discovered that the outlaw bullet had grazed the Rio Kid's head. He still breathed. Celestino breathed a fervent prayer of thanks and went to work.

He had washed the blood away when the Rio Kid's eyes fluttered open. He blinked uncomprehendingly for a moment and licked his parched lips.

"What happened?"

Celestino beamed with happiness.

"General, it ees that you get the slug and you fall from thees ledge. Celestino, he theenk you *muerto*. Can you move, *amigo*? Are the bones still *bueno*?"

The Rio Kid moved his arms and his legs, experimentally. He sat up and passed his fingers over the shallow wound along his head.

"That was a close one. I'm all right, Celestino. Just a little dizzy from the fall, I reckon. Give me yore hand."

With Celestino's aid, he came to his feet. He stood swaying a moment, then straightened. He seemed to get stronger each minute. Suddenly his face tightened.

"Where's Cramer?"

Celestino shrugged. "I tell heem run. I stay weeth you. He have good chance to beat those *renegado*."

"We'll have to find out."

The Rio Kid's guns were still in place. He inspected the weapons, reloading the chambers. Celestino helped him climb the high bank back to the ledge. Saber whinnied with pleasure and came trotting up to his rider. The velvet nose nudged the Rio Kid as though making sure he was all in one piece.

"Yuh ain't lost me yet, Saber."

The Rio Kid grinned, stroking the dun's neck. He swung into saddle and reached down a hand for Celestino. Then he headed back for Hamilton, keeping a wary eye for any of Barlow's gunhawks.

They reached the town late in the afternoon. The Rio Kid rode directly to the marshal's office and dismounted. Tex Adams, pale and drawn, looked up when the two men came in. A shadow of displeasure whipped across his face and was gone, leaving it expressionless.

"Has Alf Cramer rode in?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Three hours ago. He's at Silver Smith's." Tex saw the bandage on the Rio Kid's head and his eyes widened. "What sort of fracas yuh been in?"

"Cramer was held prisoner in his cabin. That's why he didn't show up at the trial. I want to talk to him. Things were a little too hot right after I untied him."

Tex nodded. "I can see that. Cramer said something about a bunch of gents jumpin' him."

"They should be jailed," the Rio Kid said and arose.

Tex looked up, his fine mouth twisting a little.

"It'd be hard to get 'em now. Colt will try to protect 'em."

The Rio Kid had turned toward the door. Something in the young man's voice halted him.

He turned, puzzled, realizing that the young fire-eater evidently had made no effort to find the renegades.

"What's wrong, Tex?" he asked.

"Nothin'," Tex snapped. "I'll go after 'em when I think the time's right. Yuh'd better hurry up to Silver's. Cramer's there, remember? And so is Betty."

"Yeah," the Rio Kid said thoughtfully, "I'd better. Tex, Colt may hustle them kidnapers out of town pronto. Yuh'd better corral them while yuh got the chance."

"I'm still marshal!" Tex blazed, then he shrugged. "Yuh'd better take yore *pasear*."

AS THE Rio Kid and Celestino hurried toward Silver Smith's home, Pryor puzzled over Tex Adams. The man acted as

MARTIN DUGGAN

LITTLE is known about this frontier fighter and lawman. Of Irish ancestry, he was a hard and deadly fighter and not always on the side of law and order. He was quick with fists and sixes, and seemed to glory in facing long odds—and coming out battered, but triumphant.

He seems to have wandered a good deal, almost always accepting the job of lawman in the boom towns of the Frontier. He had no deeply developed sense of civic duty, but his loyalty to the man who paid him could not be questioned.

At one time he was lawman of Leadville, Colorado, appointed by Horace Tabor. Again, he appears in the same role at Corinne, Utah, the "Burg on the Bear." Other towns knew him, for short periods; sometimes as a rowdy and tough aching for a fight, more often as a lawman who played no favorites.

Range tramp or range boss were both likely to face his guns or fists if a law or ordinance had been broken.

Duggan is one of those shadowy figures of the West who come out of obscurity, play a short but vivid role, then fade again into the unknown.

though he had lost all interest in fighting Harker and Barlow, and the Rio Kid couldn't find any reason for that. Then he grinned. After his spree, Tex probably didn't have much interest in anything.

IN ANOTHER day he'd be eager to help in the night.

Cramer was seated before the dark fireplace in Silver Smith's home. The old man had been talking to him and Smith looked worried. He looked up when Betty admitted the Rio Kid and Celestino. Cramer came to his feet.

"Yuh got away! I figgered yuh'd been salivated."

"I reckon I'm hard to kill." Bob Pryor smiled grimly. "I'd still be there if Celestino hadn't worked on me."

Betty was plainly excited by the Rio Kid's presence, but he didn't notice that.

He sat down heavily, wearily, and looked at Cramer.

"Yuh'd better tell me what happened," he said.

"The night before the trial, a couple of gents rode up and hailed the cabin. When I opened the door they stuck sixes in my stomach. I knew they was some of Barlow's men, so I figgered my life wasn't worth a plugged *peso.*"

"What kept 'em from salivating yuh?" the Rio Kid asked.

"I'm not shore. They tied me up, then about ten more came ridin' up. Nevada Unger was one of them and he was shore brave when I couldn't get my hands on him." Cramer rubbed his cheek. "I got some more things to

tally against that hombre. They roamed all over my claim and hunted for my cache. They didn't find it and that made 'em sort of mad. But I reckon they had orders to keep me hog-tied until somebody else came."

"Who?" Silver Smith snapped.

Cramer looked blank. "I don't know. He never showed up. The next day they sort of roweled me about being a witness at the trial and boasted the Rio Kid would shore see the inside of a jail for a long time. They stopped talkin' in the afternoon when Nevada came back."

"The judge changed his mind," the Rio Kid said dryly.

"I'd figgered mebbe keepin' me from court was the reason them gents called on me. It was, but there was something else, too. They wanted my claim and they kept waitin' for the gent who was to get it from me. Like I said, he never showed up."

The Rio Kid leaned forward. "Yuh have no idea who he was?"

"Ideas, shore. But them renegades spoke no names. They worked my mine and boasted how much ore they'd taken out. I have an idea Jed Harker or mebbe Colt Barlow was scheduled to come along and work me over. You came along too soon, Pryor, and upset the game. I shore thank yuh, for them gents wouldn't halt at nothin' to get a bill of sale with my signature on it."

The Rio Kid nodded and looked at Silver Smith.

"Can yuh put Cramer up for a while? He'd be fairly safe from Barlow and Harker."

"Shore." Smith nodded. "How about them outlaws at his claim?"

"I figger that since Cramer's escaped, they won't go back. But if I hadn't got curious about Cramer, they'd have forced a sale from him and then probably killed him. Nobody would have been the wiser."

Smith arose with a sigh. "I shore wish we could free Hamilton of them gents."

"We will," the Rio Kid promised. He arose and soberly eyed Cramer. "Yuh'd better stick close here, Alf. I don't want to find yuh dry-gulched."

"I'll stick," Cramer assured him.

When the Rio Kid and Celestino left the house Betty was in the doorway. The Rio Kid did not notice her except to say a polite and hurried good-by.

His mind was on the attempt to jump the Cramer claim.

"Celestino, them jaspers are bein' prodded into action. For some reason they want to bring things to a head. I reckon we've forced their hand. But when a gent like Harker starts to hurry things along, he's apt to get a bit careless."

"Then thees job she's almost ovair?"

"Not by a long sight. The real test is just about to come. We've started the ball rollin', but it'll be a fight before we win!"

CHAPTER X

Open Warfare

IN THE evening, the Rio Kid and Celestino went out on the street. Hamilton seemed to never sleep and the walks still were crowded. Donner's store blazed with lights and as many customers were there as overflowed the place in the daytime.

A man on a mule was trying desperately to buck the street traffic. He managed it for a short way, then a jerk-line team stopped him. The Rio Kid couldn't hear what he yelled to the driver, but the man started and quickly gave him room. The man on the mule kicked the animal's ribs and streaked toward the marshal's office. The Rio Kid touched Celestino and turned sharply.

"More trouble. Let's get to the jail, pronto."

They pushed their way through the crowd and at last got across the street, skipping out of the way of a lumbering freight wagon, and pushed into the marshal's office.

Duggan looked up and his Irish face was twisted in a wry grimace. Tex Adams was taking a rifle from a rack in a cabinet. The rider of the mule sat humped in a chair, breathing deep from excitement.

"What's wrong?" the Rio Kid asked.

Adams swung around. His voice was sharp and the Rio Kid instantly detected the unfriendly note in it.

"A bullion shipment was jumped by bandits about a dozen miles west. The bandits killed a couple of men and took over the shipment—teams, wagon and all. This man managed to cut a mule loose and ride back."

The Rio Kid whistled softly and threw a sharp glance at Celestino.

"Yuh'll find Harker behind it. Wait a minute, Tex, and we'll ride with yuh." Only the sting of his wound bothered him now, for Celestino had cleaned and freshly bandaged it.

Tex Adams' face darkened and he stubbornly shook his head.

"This is my job and I want to handle her alone. Yuh'd be just in the way, Pryor. I'll see yuh later."

He strode out of the room. The Rio Kid looked blankly at Martin Duggan, who slowly shook his head.

"That gent has somethin' stickin' under his saddle. I figger you make him plumb nervous and mean. Why?"

"I don't know," the Rio Kid exploded angrily. "But this is a bad time for trouble in our own ranks. Looks like Harker has declared open war!"

Tex Adams did not return until late the following day. He rode in dead tired and his

young face drawn in bitter, defeated lines. The presence of the Rio Kid in his office didn't improve his attitude. He scowled as silently he replaced the rifle in the rack. Duggan and Jeremiah Donner watched him.

"What's the facts, Tex?" Donner asked.

"I rode out where the bandits jumped the wagon. Two men dead. The renegades drove the shipment about ten miles further and off the road. They took the bullion and burned the wagon and the rest of the cargo."

"Did yuh trail the bandits?" Donner asked.

"They split up, headed south into the hills. No follerin' their trail alone, so I came back."

Donner pulled heavily at his underlip as Tex Adams threw himself in a chair.

"I'd hoped we'd get some idea where they took the bullion," Donner said, after a short silence. "That's going to hit a heap of men around here, including Silver Smith and Alf Cramer."

"I did what I could," Tex snapped.

"I reckon yuh did, Tex," said the Rio Kid. "When a band like that splits up, it takes a big posse to get anywhere."

"Meanin' I should have taken you and Duggan along?" Tex asked.

"Nope. You couldn't know beforehand what them renegades would do."

Donner arose heavily and his fingers absently played with the watch charm across his vest. His eyes grew dark and his face sagged in weary lines.

"This thing worries me, gents. First Alf Cramer is held prisoner on his own claim, to force him to sell, looks like. Then this bullion shipment is robbed. I'm wondering where Harker will strike next."

"It's a problem," the Rio Kid agreed. "But we got to fight it out. If we don't, Hamilton won't be worth livin' in."

"Sounds good," Tex commented shortly. "But it'll take more'n a flock of words."

The Rio Kid caught Duggan's glance, jerked his head toward the door, and followed Donner outside. The big storekeeper walked away from the jail and pulled off the sidewalk into a dark space between the buildings. They were away from the crowd here and there was little danger of eavesdroppers.

"Pryor," Donner said, "somethin's got into Tex Adams. In the last few days he's changed complete."

"I've noticed that," the Rio Kid answered. "It's got me puzzled."

Donner hesitated and his tone became apologetic. "I think I know what's wrong. Don't get mad, Pryor, but it concerns you."

"Me? What have I done?"

"Nothin', but Tex thinks yuh have. He's mighty in love with Betty Smith, Pryor. Planned on marryin' her—then you come along."

The Rio Kid started to laugh, but suddenly sobered.

"I reckon yuh'd better read the whole brand."

"Well, yuh're pretty famous all over the West," Donner said, "and a heap of people think yuh're a hero. Betty's heard about you and she's young. She's all mixed up between hero-worship and infatuation. She thinks it's the real thing."

"Donner, are you runnin' a sandy?"

"Never more serious, Pryor. She hardly sees Tex any more. She's had you out for dinner, and I've noticed her watchin' yuh. Tex has seen it, too, and he's green-eyed mad. I figgered you knew nothin' about it and I thought Tex would come to his senses. But he hasn't, and it's beginnin' to effect our fight with Jed Harker. I thought yuh ought to know."

"I guess I've got two people to set straight," the Rio Kid said flatly. "Shore, Betty's a pretty girl, but if she and Tex think I've had my eye on her, they're badly mistaken."

Donner sighed. "Don't handle this careless, Pryor. Yuh might not convince Tex and yuh'd make Betty mad, besides. She has a lot of influence with old Silver."

"This Is Yore Finish, Rio Kid! Yuh Know Too Much!"

FRED KEDWIN had the Kid trapped—but Bob Pryor remained cool. "Yuh can't kill me and get away with it," he said. "You built up this mine but it's run out. I'll hafta tell—"

THEN KEDWIN WENT BERSERK—and the struggle that followed is only one of the exciting high spots in SIERRA GOLD, a complete book-length novel by Tom Curry that brings you the Rio Kid at his fighting best! It's a humdinger from start to finish!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

"I'll talk to Tex as soon as I can. Here comes Martin."

Donner ambled away as Martin Duggan came up.

"Let's take a pasear among Colt Barlow's boys," the big Irishman said. "We might get some line on them."

Duggan hitched up his gun-belt and smiled broadly. Trouble might be ahead and that appealed to Duggan.

He fell in step with the Rio Kid and Celestino and the three went to the nearest saloon. It didn't take them long to realize that most of the gunslammers were not in town. One or two eyed them with faint hostility, but that was all.

At last the trio came to the Treasure. The place was crowded as usual, but Colt Barlow was not around. Neither were any of his men. Jed Harker, at the bar, saw the trio and smiled mockingly.

"Lookin' for someone?" he called to them.

"Mebbe," the Rio Kid said shortly. He watched Harker narrowly. "Yuh shore missed out on Alf Cramer, Harker."

"Did I?" Harker asked, without batting an eye. "What would I want of him?"

"His mine. It's one of the good ones."

Harker eyed the Rio Kid pityingly. "Yuh been drinkin' the wrong brands, Pryor. It's addled yore brains."

"Where's Colt?" Duggan rumbled.

Harker spread his hands wide.

"I don't know. I pay little attention to him. He's over twenty-one, and his own man."

He turned away, grinning widely. The Rio Kid and his companions returned to the street. Duggan's temper was rapidly fraying.

"There's shore a heap of skunks around here," he snapped. "I can smell 'em out but cuss me if I can find 'em! Somethin's in the wind, Pryor, and it ain't good."

"And there it is!" the Rio Kid said tightly, as he pointed to a rider who was swaying weakly on a winded horse.

Duggan sprang into the street, the Rio Kid at his heels. The Irishman halted the horse and the rider nearly fell from the saddle. His shirt was blood-stained. His pain-racked eyes focused on Duggan's badge.

"Gartney's m i n e — attacked — renegades. They burned everything and Gartney's missin'!"

"When did it happen?" Duggan snapped.

"Two hours ago."

The man passed out and fell into Duggan's arms.

HE WAS taken to the doctor's, then the trio of trouble hunters hurried to the marshal's office. They quickly told Tex what had happened, and the young marshal's face grew white with anger. He grabbed up his rifle.

"Duggan," he ordered sharply, "round up a dozen men for a posse. This has to stop!"

As the Irishman darted out the door the Rio Kid signaled to Celestino. The young Mexican quietly left, taking his position just outside on the sidewalk. The Rio Kid watched Tex empty a box of shells into his pocket.

"Tex," he said, "yuh been followin' the wrong trail and readin' a botched brand."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Betty Smith," the Rio Kid said. Tex's head came up and he looked hard at the Rio Kid. "Tex, yuh ain't got no worry about me and Betty. She's mighty nice and I'd shore like to see you two hitched."

Tex flushed, then his eyes narrowed. "I wish I could believe yuh, Pryor. But since you come to Hamilton Betty's lost interest in me."

"Tex, yuh can believe me. I ain't interested in any girl. I'm too much a range wanderer. The truth is, it took someone else to tell me what stuck in yore craw, and I was clean surprised."

Adams' eyes probed deep into the Rio Kid, weighing and judging. His face showed inner stress as jealousy struggled with what the Rio Kid told him.

"Yuh make it sound a heap different, Pryor," he finally said. "Mebbe yuh tell the truth. But just one thing will make me shore. Stay away from Betty."

The Rio Kid grunted in disgust. "I'll have to go to Silver's house. There'll be times you won't be there. Yuh have to take my word I ain't tryin' to get her from yuh, and never have been."

Tex swept cartridges into his pocket. "Time's wastin'," he said without inflection. "I'll think it over."

They hurried to the livery stable for their horses. Duggan had already gathered a posse and armed men waited impatiently for the marshal. It did not take them long to saddle and in a short time the band rode grimly toward the hills.

CHAPTER XI

Reign of Terror

GRADUALLY the town dropped behind the posse. The night was dark, stars but no moonlight, and the trail grew rough as it mounted into the broken timberland. Almost every foot of the trail was perfect for ambush but Tex Adams, in the lead, rode pell-mell as though he had no fear of such danger.

The Rio Kid rode ready for instant action. He gave Colt Barlow credit for swift thinking and quick action. And it was the Rio Kid who first heard the pound of hoofs ahead. He called out and the posse drew up, listening. Only one horseman approached, evidently taking the twisting trail at breakneck speed.

Tex rode ahead of the band, waiting,

Abruptly the rider shot around a bend of the trail and bore down on the posse. Tex shouted an order to halt.

Instantly a gun blasted and Tex's hat sailed from his head. The rider veered toward the trees with a yell of fear.

"That's Barton," a posseman yelled. "Hey, Barton! This is the law!"

The rider pulled his horse to a plunging halt, whirled it around and came riding back. Lawmen guns eased back into leather. The rider came close, halted, and they saw his fear-drawn face. Barton gasped for breath, then got control of his voice.

"I thought yuh was some more of them renegades! They done hit my place, burned me out. I managed to get away."

"How many of 'em?" the Rio Kid snapped.

"Twenty anyhow—mebbe thirty. They was masked, but one of 'em shore looked like Nevada Unger. They burned everything I had!"

"Gartney," Tex said grimly, "now Barton. Where'll they strike next?"

"We'd better hit the trail pronto," the Rio Kid gritted. "Looks like they aim to clean out this whole stretch of claims."

"Head for Hamilton, Barton," Tex snapped. "Yuh saw Nevada and that makes yuh a valuable witness. We'll stop these gunslammers and I shore hope we jail or gun the lot. Let's ride, men."

He touched with spurs and the posse streaked after him. Barton rode toward distant Hamilton through the dark night that concealed lurking danger. . . .

The Gartney claim was a shambles and no one was about. A big band had struck suddenly and hard and had destroyed everything in sight. Then the outlaws had ridden south down the ridge.

Barton's smaller place was also a scene of complete destruction and again the trail led south.

The posse urged every bit of speed from their mounts, their faces grim. They struck two more claims where cabins were burned, everything destroyed.

Beyond the second scene of destruction, the outlaws had suddenly scattered. Evidently they had completed their evil work for the night.

The possemen milled uncertainly. The Rio Kid, Duggan and Tex Adams held a brief consultation. Tex was for breaking up his posse and following the scattered trails but Duggan and the Rio Kid overrode him.

"It'll get yuh nowhere," the Rio Kid argued. "These killers will head for Hamilton. Once they reach the highway or town their trail is lost and they're safe."

"But we can't just give up," Tex insisted.

The Rio Kid shook his head. "We ain't, Tex. Yuh got one good lead. Barton saw Nevada Unger and yuh can arrest that gent. I got an idea Nevada will crack and tell all he knows."

Tex's face lighted. "Yuh named it! They'll shore pay for all this."

The Rio Kid looked over the glowing embers where once a cabin had stood.

"It's a reign of terror. I got an idea we're going to have a lot more of it and there'll be a heap of surprises comin' our way." His lips thinned. "We won't like 'em either."

Weary, but still angry, the posse returned to Hamilton. Tex asked all the men to be ready for instant service again and not a one refused. Tex, Duggan, the Rio Kid and Celestino hurried to the marshal's office, eager to question Barton. He wasn't there.

"He's put up for the night somewheres," Tex said dispiritedly. "We'll have to wait till mornin'."

"I don't like this," the Rio Kid said thoughtfully. "Anything could have happened to him."

"But we could hunt all night and not find him," Tex said wearily.

The Rio Kid nodded. He and Celestino returned to their hotel to throw themselves on their beds. They were asleep almost instantly.

BRIGHT morning sunshine awakened them. They hurried to breakfast, then to the marshal's office.

Barton had not appeared, Tex told them, little worry lines between his eyes. Then Martin Duggan came in. They waited for Barton

[*Turn page*]

Can't Keep Grandma In Her Chair

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(Adv.)

until finally the Rio Kid arose and shifted his holsters.

"Somethin's happened. Tex, you wait here in case he shows up. Martin, Celestino and me will take a pasear around town. We got to find him."

The three left the office and walked aimlessly down the street. They searched the crowd for a glimpse of Barton but didn't see him. On impulse, the Rio Kid turned in at the Treasure Saloon.

Jed Harker was just descending the stairs. He saw the Rio Kid and his friends, came on down and stopped directly before the Rio Kid. His harsh glance swept over Duggan and Celestino and he dismissed them with the flick of his eyes.

"Could I see yuh a minute—alone?" he asked.

The Rio Kid nodded. He and Harker walked to the bar and leaned easily against it. Harker ordered drinks, then waved the bartender away. He lifted his glass.

"Yore health," he grunted. "If yuh're smart."

The Rio Kid downed his drink, smiled at Harker as he replaced the glass.

"What do yuh have to tell me?" he asked.

"It's mighty short and brief?" he asked. grimly. "The other night I hinted Hamilton could be mighty unhealthy. It's goin' to get worse. Yuh might die if yuh was here after sundown."

The Rio Kid's brows arched. "Yuh speak plain enough, Harker. Leave, or die—is that it?"

"That's it. I hate to see a good man wasted."

"I'll remember yore kind thoughts after sundown," the Rio Kid said pleasantly. "Where was Colt and the boys last night?"

"Around," Harker replied. "Another drink? It'll probably be our last together."

"Thanks. I'll take it. But I have an idea who'll shovel coal first."

They drank again and Harker swung away from the bar and left the saloon. The Rio Kid joined his friends and told them of the warning. Duggan's big fists clenched.

"I ought to jail him right now!"

"No use." The Rio Kid shrugged. "Yuh can bet Harker ain't goin' to be the one to use the drygulch six. We'll just be ready for trouble."

When they returned to the jail Barton still had not appeared. Tex saw by their faces that they had found no trace of the missing man. The Rio Kid repeated Harker's threat.

"Mebbe we'd better see Silver Smith and Donner," he said. "They might know where Barton is."

And it was at that moment that the cashier at Donner's store came flying in the door. His eyes were wide, and his words came tumbling out.

"Murder! Dead man! At the store!"

Tex spun around. "Donner?"

The cashier shook his head. "No, somebody else. Yuh'd better come quick."

The lawmen raced for Donner's store, following the cashier. He cut around the building to the back. There was a huge pile of empty crates and boxes back there, discarded when shipments were unpacked. Donner stood in the midst of a circle of men around a huge wooden case. He looked up as the law appeared.

"A clerk found him this mornin'. He came out to get an empty carton and saw the man's boots."

The ring parted for the lawmen. The Rio Kid's face grew dark when he looked down at the huddled body in the big wooden crate. Barton lay there, blank, dead eyes staring sightlessly upward. His throat had been slashed.

"I was afraid of somethin' like this," he muttered.

Tex Adams swore. "There's our witness! What chance have we got now?"

Barton's body was taken away and the gloomy lawmen returned to the jail. They faced the cold, hard fact that Jed Harker had ordered a daring, successful raid on the silver claims. A witness had been quickly and neatly silenced.

SAM CLEMENS found them that way. He halted just inside the door and his quick smile vanished. He sat down, carefully placed his tall hat on the floor, and stared at the four.

"You look as sorrowful as I did when I went to my own funeral."

Duggan looked up, interested despite himself. "Yore own funeral? How come?"

"Well," Clemens said smoothly, "I had a twin brother. We looked so much alike no one could tell us apart. My mother had one terrible time, so did our friends and our teacher. We both got sick at the same time. My twin brother died." Clemens sighed reminiscently. "It was a beautiful, sad and touching funeral."

"I thought yuh said it was yores?" Duggan interrupted.

"It was!" Clemens faced him. "My brother died, but we looked so much alike, they buried me by mistake. I'll never forget it."

The four men suddenly burst into laughter. Clemens had broken their gloom and raised their spirits. The grinning Rio Kid asked the reason for Clemens' visit.

"I have some of that information you want. I can't tell you who's behind Jed Harker—if anyone. But I do know something about Consolidated Hamilton."

"What?" The Rio Kid sobered instantly.

"I couldn't find out anything here. The folks at the Consolidated are mighty tight-lipped. But I have connections at Carson City and I wrote a letter. Here's the answer."

He pulled a letter from his pocket, glanced at it then looked up, his eyes twinkling.

"Jed Harker has been selling claims to Consolidated Hamilton, directorship unknown. Mr. Smith and Mr. Donner are very much concerned that Mr. William Sharon come to a peaceful, law-abiding Hamilton. They want

him to invest money here." Clemens chuckled and stroked his mustache. "Well, Mr. William Sharon owns all but two shares of Consolidated Hamilton."

"What?" the Rio Kid exclaimed.

Clemens nodded. "That's right. Shares in the corporation are limited to one hundred, of which Mr. Sharon holds ninety-eight. One is owned by Mr. Jed Harker, and guess who owns the other remaining share?"

"I give up." The Rio Kid shook his head.

"Mr. Arthur Barlow, commonly known as Colt Barlow."

Clemens passed the letter to the Rio Kid, who quickly read it. It was signed by an official of the State government and written on an official letterhead. The Rio Kid passed back the sheet.

"Hold on to that. We may need it."

"There were some mining claims sales yesterday and transfers this morning," Clemens observed.

Tex Adams expelled his breath in a gusty sigh. "All right—who sold?"

"Jed Harker transferred three new mine holdings to Consolidated Hamilton. He displayed signed bills of sale from the former owners. Gartney, Barton and Miller sold their claims to Harker yesterday. He sold them to Consolidated Hamilton."

Tex Adams let out an explosive oath.

"The claims that were burned last night! Gartney and Miller are missin', and we just found Barton murdered!"

Clemens looked stunned. Then his eyes gleamed and he came to his feet.

"This will be a story! A sensation! If I can do anything more let me know." He halted abruptly. "Oh, something else. Bill Sharon gets into Hamilton by tomorrow's stage."

The Rio Kid looked up. "You bring more surprises than it's legal for any one man to have. There ain't much doubt now who's behind Harker, but it'll take the devil's own time to prove it. It's goin' to be a job to pin them killin's and burnin's on Barlow and Harker. They've played smart."

"Shall I continue to watch Harker?" Clemens asked.

"No," the Rio Kid answered slowly. "Listen around and see if yuh get any line on where Barlow's gunnies were last night. There's bound to be one who'll talk a little careless. We want that man. If we can break him, then the rest might be corraled."

"I'll see what I can do," Clemens answered eagerly. "And now I leave you gents to your very pleasant thoughts."

Duggan and Adams went out on their regular patrol. Hamilton was so peaceful that the big Irishman rumbled angrily. He watched the gunhawks with unusual sharpness but the shady gentry seemed to go out of their way to look as innocent as lambs.

Duggan's scowl grew darker as the day wore along.

CHAPTER XII

Jaws of the Trap

FOR some time the Rio Kid and Celestino stayed in their room at the hotel. For the moment they were stopped. There was no clue as to who had killed Barton. Adams' men, sent to scour the hills for Miller and Gartney, had not as yet reported.

Finally the Rio Kid impatiently arose and grabbed his hat.

"I'm checkin' on Cramer's health at Silver Smith's," he growled. "They might try for him."

"*Por Dios,* thees Harker ees like the devil!" said Celestino.

"*Amigo,*" the Rio Kid said slowly, "it might be smart if yuh sort of talked to some of the Mexicans in town. Lots of times they see a heap. Yuh take a pasear while I'm checkin' on Cramer."

The two parted company outside the hotel. The Rio Kid found that Cramer was all right, but impatient at being confined to Smith's house. He grinned wryly at the Rio Kid.

"And that shore makes me loco, when yuh figger Miss Betty tryin' to make me comfortable. She's a fine girl." Cramer nudged the Rio Kid. "She shore thinks yuh're about the finest man in these parts."

"I wish she'd get that out of her head," Bob Pryor said impatiently.

He dismissed the subject and mentioned what Clemens had learned. Cramer listened, growing more astounded and angry by the moment. When the Rio Kid finished, he pounded his fist in the palm of his hands.

"Why, the sidewinding coyotes! I ought to go out and salivate the whole bunch!"

"Yuh'll stay right here," the Rio Kid snapped. "I don't want to find yuh in a packin' box with yore throat cut."

"At least Harker won't get my claim."

The Rio Kid shook his head and arose.

"Don't be too shore, Cramer. A dead man can't argue much about a forged signature on a bill of sale. You stay close. *Adios.*"

The Rio Kid returned to his room and waited for Celestino. About two hours later, he came in, his deep brown eyes shining with excitement.

"Generel, eet is the luck we have. One Garces Madron has know who keel Barton. He see heem."

The Rio Kid eagerly jumped up. "Who was it?"

"I find heem out tonight. Thees Madron, he scared talk right out. He send *companero* who take me to Madron tonight. Then I breeng heem to you. General, we have thees Harker maybe, no?"

The Rio Kid saw the plausibility of Celestino's story. Peons were afraid of their own shadows, afraid to talk only to those of their own nationality and then only after precautions.

"Be ready for trouble, *amigo,*" he warned. "It shore sounds good, but keep that six of yores ready to plumb discourage any trickery."

Celestino smiled. "I shall be mos' careful, my General."

The searchers in the hills finally came back and reported to Tex Adams. They had found no sign of the missing miners. There was some talk that Gartney and Miller had left suddenly for the Comstock. But the Rio Kid was sure that Harker or Barlow had started that rumor.

After supper, Celestino went to keep his appointment. He headed for the section of town where the Mexicans and more luckless miners lived. There was a garish little *cantina* where the peons could drink raw *tequila* cheaply.

Celestino entered the dirty, smoky room. Everywhere he heard liquid Spanish as his countrymen chattered. Celestino's quick eye shot around the room but he saw none of Barlow's men. A young Mexican at a back table signaled him. Celestino joined him.

"Senor Garces will meet me?" Celestino asked in Spanish.

"Yes, but he is very frightened. He fears that Colt Barlow or some of his men will kill him if he is seen speaking to you."

The man gave a swift look around the room.

"Then how may he help if he will not come forward?" Celestino demanded.

"You will come to him, senor. He will tell you his story. Then, if he has value, you will slip Garces to the protection of the Rio Kid, your patron. Garces will be safe then. Is that agreeable?"

"It will have to be if Madron is so frightened." Celestino shrugged. "It gets late. Can we not go to Madron's *casa?*"

"*Si*—now."

CELESTINO followed the young man out of the *cantina.* He loosened his gun in his holster as his guide led the way down the street. Then they stopped before one of the huts.

"That place is Garces'. He pretends to sleep but he expects us."

After quick glances up and down the deserted street, he walked into the littered yard and up to the door, followed by Celestino. He pushed the door open.

"Garces?" he called softly. "It is Manuel. He is with me."

"*Bueno.* Come in quickly, *por Dios!*"

As they stepped inside the dark room, Manuel whispered:

"Close the door! Then we will light a lamp."

Celestino closed the door. Instantly rushing bodies struck him, taloned fingers grabbed at hands and throat. Celestino exploded into action, trying to twist away. His hand dropped toward his gun. Someone grabbed his wrist, twisted his arm behind his back.

Heavy grunts sounded close beside him and Celestino struck blindly with his feet. A man swore, then a gun barrel landed squarely on Celestino's head. He dropped limply to the floor. . . .

When the young Mexican's eyes fluttered open, someone had lighted the lamp. Wolfish faces grinned at him triumphantly. He tried to move, but found he was lashed to the chair by the table. Colt Barlow sat across the table, cold eyes boring into Celestino's face. Beside Barlow, Manuel leered at him.

"He's come around," Barlow said. "Yuh did a good job, Manuel."

Celestino, held tightly by the ropes, sat quietly, waiting. Colt Barlow smiled at him, highly pleased.

'Yuh got just a little while to live, Mexican. Yuh get hung in the mornin'. I reckon the boys here will be mighty mad because yuh knifed yore friend, the Rio Kid."

Celestino's lips curled. "That, she is crazee."

Barlow chuckled. "Yuh're wrong there, *amigo.* We got yuh out of the way. We got yore sombrero and yore gun. Manuel's goin' to the Rio Kid to say yuh got trapped by my boys and need him right away. He comes rushin' to save yuh, and he'll get salivated. The marshal will find yore gun and hat. Yuh turned on the Rio Kid and killed him. My boys get right mad about that and hang yuh before anyone can stop 'em. That ain't loco, either, when yuh look at it right. I'll see that the citizens of Hamilton do."

Celestino stared at him. Barlow was right. A few might guess the truth, but the townsmen would figure he was just another killing Mexican strung up for murder.

"Bring the Rio Kid down the alley back of here," Barlow said to Manuel. "Drop when yuh reach the gate so yuh won't catch some of the bullets we'll be slingin'. That'll end the Rio Kid. A barroom brawl tomorrer will plant Duggan in Boot Hill. Get along now, Manuel."

Manuel glided from the room. Colt Barlow seemed to be enjoying himself, savoring every moment of his triumph.

"This is going to be a pleasure, senor. The boss held me back, hopin' the Rio Kid would come to terms. I'm glad he didn't. I ain't forgettin' this shoulder he winged."

"He weel keel you thees time," Celestino spat.

Barlow threw back his head and laughed.

"Gag him, boys. He can just sit here and listen to his boss get salivated. When yuh hear the guns, Mexican, there won't be any Rio Kid no more."

A dirty neckerchief was balled roughly into Celestino's mouth and another tied tightly across his face to keep it in place. Colt Barlow blew out the lamp. The door opened and the killers streamed outside. Barlow's voice sounded with a devil's chuckle.

"Listen close, *amigo*, and then start saying yore prayers. Remember, yuh hang by dawn."

The door closed and his heavy steps faded away. There was only dark silence. In panic and fear for his General, Celestino tugged madly at his bonds. He only chafed his wrists. . . .

THE Rio Kid waited impatiently for the return of Celestino. Time dragged slowly and he grew more worried. Finally he went down to the lobby and tried to make himself comfortable in one of the big chairs.

He saw a young Mexican come in hesitantly and sidle up to the desk. He spoke to the clerk who looked over to the Rio Kid. The Mexican came hurrying over, a battered sombrero held nervously in his hands.

"Senor, I have come with thees message. Celestino Mireles ees weeth Madron. Madron, he is very sure he get keeled. He talk to you at hees house, nowhere else. Celestino Mireles, he ask that you come—pronto."

The Rio Kid studied the Mexican whose eyes dropped before the straight, hard gaze.

"Why didn't Celestino come himself?"

"He theenk maybe Madron run away. He wait and watch."

"Where does Madron live?"

"I take you there," Manuel evaded. "Eet is to hurry, senor."

The Rio Kid nodded in quick decision. "All right. We'll see what Madron has to tell."

The young Mexican pushed his sombrero on his head and led the way to the door. On the sidewalk he turned.

"Thees way, senor. I take—"

He broke off with a surprised, frightened gasp. The Rio Kid's gun barrel was jabbed into his side. Bob Pryor's voice sounded cold as ice.

"I take you, *amigo*. This is too old a trick for me to fall for it."

"But, senor!" Manuel wailed. "I speak the truth! I have—"

"The marshal's office," the Rio Kid snapped. "If yuh're tellin' the truth, yuh've got nothin' to be afraid of. Start movin', hombre, or a lead slug will help yuh along."

Manuel started meekly down the walk, keeping his hands out in the open. He had a deep respect for the gun in his back and the man behind it. He walked to the marshal's office and in the door.

"Here's an hombre who knows somethin'," the Rio Kid replied to Adams' and Duggan's surprised looks. "I reckon we'd better work it out of him."

"*Por Dios!*" Manuel broke out. "I know notheeng! Only w'at I tell you!"

The Rio Kid relieved him of his gun, and pulled a wicked-looking knife from between his shoulder blades. Holding Manuel under his gun, he told Duggan and Tex what had happened.

"I suspicioned the old play when Celestino told me about this Madron. I doubt if he exists. Of course, there was always a chance, so I let Celestino go to meet him. Now this sidewinder comes in with his story and it's the same old doublecross. Tex, have yuh got an empty cell where me and Duggan could sort of work the truth out of this jasper?"

Tex jerked his thumb toward the rear door.

"Help yoreself," he answered.

Manuel protested and wailed, pleaded his innocence. But the Rio Kid and Duggan grimly dragged him through the door and closed it. Tex Adams leaned back in his chair, rolled a quirly and slowly smoked it.

The door opened. The Rio Kid and Duggan came out, both angry and grim. Tex arose without a word and turned the lamp low.

"Yuh locked the cell door?" he asked.

"He'll keep, the Rio Kid said, "until we bring back some more polecats to keep him company. He talked his head off."

The Rio Kid led the way toward the squalid Mexican quarter. Not far away from the hovel where Celestino tried vainly to escape from his ropes, the Rio Kid halted the others.

"Tex, can you cover the front of the place? Duggan and me will go down the alley, the way Manuel was supposed to come. It's plumb dark and the killers won't be able to tell Manuel ain't in the game no more. When Duggan reaches the gate, he'll drop flat. They'll expect that and start shootin' at me."

"Yuh're takin' a chance," Duggan growled.

"Mebbe. But I don't aim to be standin' either. The minute yuh drop, I'll hit the ground. Tex, when the guns start blastin', hit for the house. Get Celestino loose if yuh can and give him a gun. I reckoned when you come into the fight, Colt's going to be plumb discouraged."

Tex nodded, and faded away in the shadows. The Rio Kid touched Duggan's arm.

"Lead the way, Martin. Remember, drop flat when yuh hit the gate."

"Shore, Pryor, and don't you hesitate none. I'd hate to send yuh flowers yuh couldn't smell."

CHAPTER XIII

Counter-attack

CAUTIOUSLY the two lawmen cut down the alley, Martin Duggan a few steps ahead of the Rio Kid. They went with fingers close to gun butts. Duggan kicked a can with his boot and cursed softly. The sound seemed triply loud in the silent, dark night.

At last, just ahead, they saw the dim bulk of the house, the crazy leaning fence posts and the sagging gate. Duggan quietly pulled his six from

leather. Behind him, the Rio Kid's guns slid out of their holsters. Duggan walked boldly forward and the Rio Kid catfooted behind him. Their eyes probed the darkness, but the ambushers were well-hidden. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful.

Duggan passed through the gate, and dropped. Instantly Colts thundered from the shadows and darting flames licked toward the gate.

The Rio Kid lay flat and the bullets passed harmlessly over his head. His lips twisted in a fighting grin as he dropper hammers, guns rocking a deadly answer back at the flashes. Duggan joined in.

A man screamed and another choked, the sound gargling off. The Rio Kid rolled and bullets churned the ground where he had been. He slammed lead at the gun flash at the corner of the house, then changed his target for a flame that lanced from a high patch of weeds.

Men cursed and threshed in the darkness. A shadow flitted toward the house and the Rio Kid sent it rolling and screaming with two bullets.

"Spread out!" Colt Barlow's voice raised in angry command. "Circle him! He can't get away!"

The Rio Kid came to his hands and knees and scuttled inside the gate. Guns blasted at him, but he moved too quickly to be a target for effective shooting. A few slugs nipped close but none touched him.

Duggan had worked his way halfway to the dark hut and had found partial protection behind a pile of cans and rubbish. His gun roared steadily.

Shadows were difficult to penetrate but the Rio Kid sensed that the renegades were spreading out, following Colt's orders. Glass suddenly tinkled from windows in the house. Two new guns joined in the six-gun symphony.

The new attack took the ambushers completely by surprise. For a moment their fire centered on the house, then Duggan and the Rio Kid took more chips. Their lead sought out the skulkers in the shadows. Gunfire ripped the night apart.

Abruptly the outlaw fire halted. A tense silence gripped the night. The Rio Kid searched the darkness, his ears keened to every sound. He heard muted rustlings, heard a man groan weakly.

"They sleep around the house!" Celestino cried a warning. "They escape!"

The Rio Kid jumped to his feet. Duggan pounded after him, across the dark yard toward the corner of the house. Another vindictive burst of gunfire drove them to cover. Barlow's men kept lead singing their way. Guns roared constantly. Duggan and the Rio Kid returned the fire but dared not advance.

From the front of the house, Celestino and Tex emptied their sixes at the outlaws. There was a defiant, angry yell, then the night was still. The Rio Kid cautiously slipped around the corner of the house, pressed flat against the wall as he advanced. Duggan swore continuously, still back at the corner.

The front door banged open and the Rio Kid froze, guns uptilted. Lights flickered on the houses nearby.

"They have gone, General!" Celestino called out.

He came around the house and the Rio Kid straightened.

"Yuh hurt, *amigo?*" he asked.

"No, unless she's the pride. I have peek up the old joke, General, but she work. I am disgust' weeth myself."

The Rio Kid chuckled. "Don't let it bother yuh. It had me fooled for a while, too. We got yore friend, Manuel, safe in jail."

"I would like heem alone, maybe ten minutes," Celestino spat out.

Tex Adams joined them and the three turned toward Duggan.

"I can't tie this blasted bandage!" the Irishman bellowed angrily. "The back of me hand to the sulkin' snake that nipped me! Can't one of you hombres give a hand?"

He had taken a bullet in the fleshy part of the upper arm, the first the Rio Kid had known his friend had been hit. He helped Duggan and tightly set the bandage.

ALREADY a crowd had gathered, curiously lining the fence. Tex Adams drove them off.

"Let's see if we got one of them skunks," the Rio Kid suggested.

The four quartered across the yard, beating the bushes and the rubbish heaps. They found two dead men, more of the gunhawk breed. The walls of the house were riddled with lead, empty cartridge cases marked the course of the battle. At last the Rio Kid straightened.

"Colt must have pulled off his wounded so they wouldn't talk. Did yuh have any trouble reachin' Celestino, Tex?"

"None. As soon as the fireworks started, I ran to the door. It was locked, but a slug broke it. The firing covered the sound of my shot. I untied Celestino and we joined in the party."

"I reckon it's time we paid back Mr. Harker," the Rio Kid said grimly.

"How yuh mean?" Tex demanded.

"He's tried to cripple and kill us. He's raided the silver claims and stolen some outright. Now Celestino's story is enough to arrest that hombre, Colt Barlow."

"But where'll we find him?"

The Rio Kid shrugged. "One of Harker's places. We'll start in closin' 'em up, forcin' Colt out in the open or to hide out in Harker's office or Consolidated Hamilton."

"Close Jed's saloons!" Tex exclaimed. "Jed will have 'em open as soon as he gets an order from Judge Ransdale."

"The judge could be made hard to find," the Rio Kid suggested. "I reckon he could be visitin' Silver Smith for a day of two."

Duggan chuckled. "She sounds good to me. I shore would like to pay somebody back for this hole in my arm."

"Does it bother yuh?" The Rio Kid turned.

"Not so's I couldn't close up a few saloons," Duggan said, and grinned. "Let's get to work."

In little more than an hour Judge Ransdale was a reluctant guest of Silver Smith, but his protests to his guard, Alf Cramer, were not too insistent. Donner had signed a nuisance complaint that bore Ransdale's signature, given under duress. The Rio Kid handed the paper to Tex.

"We're shore playin' cat and mouse with the law, but it's Jed Harker's law in this town. I don't reckon he'll like his own medicine."

They headed for Main Street where most of the saloons were located. As they entered the first, four grim men who instantly brought a silence to the noisy room, the fat bartender watched them narrowly. Tex slapped the complaint on the bar before the man.

"Yuh're closed," he said briefly. "Yuh got five minutes to empty the place and get her locked tight. I'll take the key."

"Yuh can't do this!" the man blazed. "Jed Harker will have it open in five minutes."

"Will he?" the Rio Kid asked coldly. "Either this place empties peaceful or we'll go to work. Five minutes, hombre."

Four unrelenting pair of eyes bored into the bartender's own. He cursed, and turned.

"We're closing!" he yelled. "Everybody out! The law's done gone loco."

Duggan's roar carried to the farthest corner. "In five minutes we pull our irons if the place ain't empty."

There was no argument. The customers edged around the four fighting lawmen and eased out the door. The place emptied quickly. The Rio Kid turned to the barman.

"All right! Douse the lamps and get the keys."

They made three more stops, closing each place tightly. Then just ahead of them was the Treasure, brightly lighted, going full blast. Tex halted.

"That one, too?"

"That one," the Rio Kid repeated. "If we don't, Jed Harker will know we're bluffin'. We want to set him back on his heels, hard and sudden. The best way to hit him is through his cash box."

NEWS of them must have traveled ahead, for as they entered the Treasure every sound died instantly. Men remained motionless at the bar and at the tables. Harker, red-faced and angry, turned from the bar to face the quartette. He spoke with difficulty, trying to hold himself in.

"Adams, what fool play are yuh makin'? Yuh can't close my places. As soon as I get Judge Ransdale, I'll open 'em up."

"Have yuh found the judge?" the Rio Kid asked.

Harker's eyes narrowed a moment.

"I will," he snapped. "Now get out of here and quit this foolishness."

The Rio Kid stepped forward. His eyes locked with those of Harker and his chin thrust forward. He spoke slowly, each word a challenge.

"Let's get things straight between us, Harker. Yore man, Colt Barlow, tried to kill me tonight. He planned to hang Celestino here. I believe he murdered Barton and I can be pretty shore he led the raids on the mines the other night. We aim to get Colt, and we aim to run every gunslammer out of Hamilton. Closing yore places is one way to do it."

"Prove them claims!" Harker said loudly.

"I'm goin' to," the Rio Kid snapped. His eyes grew bleak. "Colt's yore man. So's Nevada Unger, and Barton had a glimpse of him. That's why Barton was murdered. Yuh're behind this whole mess, Harker, and I'm mighty tired of bein' shot at. We're closin' the Treasure, and I hope yuh give me an excuse to tear the place and you apart. Ten minutes to clear the place out and lock up. That's final."

Harker's nostrils flared with his deep, angry breathing. His fists clenched. The Rio Kid stood straight and ready, hands hanging easily close to his matched sixes. Harker's eyes wavered, swung away.

"Close her up," he growled over his shoulder to the bartenders. "She'll be open tomorrow." He faced the Rio Kid again. "Yuh're goin' to look mighty nice in a long black box, Captain Pryor."

CHAPTER XIV

Man-hunt

HARKER'S order was obeyed. The Treasure was closed, the customers moving toward the door around Jed Harker and the lawmen. Harker watched them go, saying nothing. When the last man was out the door he turned toward the stairs that led upward.

The Rio Kid came up beside him.

"We're lookin' for Colt Barlow. Yore office would be a good place for him to hide."

Harker glared at him, then continued up the stairs. The Rio Kid and Celestino searched the rooms while Harker sat silent and furious at his desk. They found no trace of Colt. They returned to Harker's office.

"I told yuh once yuh might be makin' a mistake," the Rio Kid said. "Yuh been ridin' high, wide and handsome, but yore ride is over, Harker, though yuh might not know it."

"I'll judge that," Harker gritted.

"Yuh can tell Colt, Nevada, and the rest of

yore gunmen that Hamilton ain't safe no more. They'll either go to jail or to Boot Hill."

"Yuh talk big, Pryor."

"I'll back it, Harker. One word of advice to you, then I'll leave yuh to yore pleasant thoughts. Yuh can still pull out of Hamilton with a whole skin. Yuh still got time to leave before we get the facts that'll put yuh in jail for a long time. I'd advise yuh to think it over. Good-night."

The Rio Kid walked out. Celestino smiled into Harker's frowning face and softly closed the door. They clattered down the stairs where Duggan and Adams waited.

"He's not here," Pryor said. "We'll have to look somewheres else."

By morning a round dozen saloons had been closed, every one of them Jed Harker's. The rest were visited, searched, and owners warned not to harbor Barlow or any of his gunhawks. Wearily, just before dawn, the four men returned to Smith's house.

Ransdale dozed in a chair but wrathfully awakened when the lawmen came in. Cramer stretched. Silver Smith and Donner looked up hopefully. The Rio Kid sank down in the nearest chair.

Betty appeared in the doorway. Tex smiled at her but she didn't see him. She watched the Rio Kid. Tex's smile vanished and he sat down.

"We didn't find Colt, but we got Harker tight closed," he reported. "Colt pulled too bold a move and he's hunted for cover, figgerin' Harker can fix things for him. If we can get him and Nevada Unger in our hands, there won't be much Harker can do."

Judge Ransdale stirred angrily in his chair.

"Are you letting me out of here?" he demanded.

"Yuh're free," the Rio Kid answered wearily. "But don't figure on givin' Harker writs to open his places. They won't be honored, and don't try to jail any of us. Yuh got what yuh deserved, no more."

Tex raised his head as though to speak, then dropped his eyes. His frown deepened, but he said nothing.

Ransdale pulled his bulk from the chair.

"I'm judge, Captain Pryor," he snarled. "You've acted like a group of high-handed bandits. I intend to see that something is done about it."

The Rio Kid wearily waved him away. "As yuh please, hombre. I advised Harker to leave town. You can take the same advice, before somebody from the State capital comes with a warrant for yuh."

Ransdale spluttered angrily but a touch of fright crept into his face. He stalked out of the room and slammed the door as he left the house.

There was little more that could be done that night. Betty served coffee and there followed a tired discussion of plans. All felt that they stood on the very threshold of triumph. If Colt Barlow could be captured, then they could expose the whole evil scheme for the control of Hamilton and its mines.

Just before dawn the Rio Kid and Celestino returned to their hotel to snatch a few hours of sleep. The young Mexican bolted the door and hung his holster over the bedpost, so that the gun could be reached in one swift movement.

They slept the sleep of tired men, but the Rio Kid snapped awake at a light tap on his door. He sat upright.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Sam Clemens."

THE Rio Kid jumped from bed and unbolted the door. Celestino had drawn his six, covering the door. But it was Sam Clemens who stood in the hall. He came in the room, cocking a bushy brow when he saw Celestino's six.

"Put it up," he said. "I've never liked to look at Colts, especially when they're looking back at me."

He sat down, asking questions about the events of the night before. The Rio Kid briefly sketched them as he and Celestino dressed. Clemens listened, throwing in a shrewd question now and then.

"I hope you find Colt. But here's something else to worry about. Bill Sharon came in on the stage half an hour ago."

"Where is he?" the Rio Kid asked.

"He's at the hotel next to Consolidated Hamilton. I tried to get an interview with him, but he claims this is just a vacation."

The Rio Kid looked thoughtfully out the window. "Another thing to watch. But our first problem is Colt Barlow. Clemens, we'd be somewheres if we could even pick up Nevada Unger. That gent would lose his nerve and talk a heap quicker than Barlow."

"You're right there. I'll be around town, Pryor. I hope I'm present when Barlow's found."

He left them and the two range wanderers went to breakfast, then to the marshal's office. Tex Adams was not around but his deputy, Hal Telow, was.

"Him and Duggan is huntin'," Hal said. "I think they're coverin' the Mexican quarter."

"We might as well hunt, too," the Rio Kid said and Celestino nodded eagerly. "We'll keep in touch."

Colt Barlow and Nevada Unger seemed to be well-hidden. There was no trace of them and for all his questioning, the Rio Kid could find no one who had seen them. He gave up at last and he and Celestino wandered aimlessly into Donner's big store.

Jeremiah Donner was excited and worried. He signaled them to come into his office. He had no more than closed the door than he swung eagerly around.

"Sharon's in town!" he exclaimed.

"I heard," the Rio Kid said drily. "You get mighty excited about that hombre."

"Why not?" Donner asked. "He came to see

me, not half an hour ago. He asked a lot of questions about business in Hamilton, the extent of the silver lode and the ownership."

The Rio Kid looked faintly surprised. "He works fast."

"A dynamic man," Donner replied. His face clouded. "But he's not shore he's goin' to invest. He said he'd heard about a lot of lawlessness here and that's always bad for business."

The Rio Kid sank back, his face plainly showing his disbelief.

"Donner, there's a heap in this trouble yuh don't savvy yet. Don't let Sharon worry yuh. He'll invest in Hamilton. In fact he already has."

"Yuh're loco!" exclaimed Donner. "The only big investor here is Consolidated Hamilton."

"And Bill Sharon owns that," the Rio Kid snapped. He arose disregarding Donner's stunned surprise. "Keep that under yore hat. It's somethin' to know when yuh dicker with Sharon. Set tight till we catch Colt Barlow. Yuh'll notice a changed attitude in Mr. Sharon, then."

He and Celestino went out to the street. Someone in the crowd behind them gave a hail and the Rio Kid turned.

"Cramer!" he barked. Anger showed in his face. "What yuh doin' out here? Yuh're a candidate for an outlaw slug."

Cramer shrugged. "I got plumb tired of stayin' in a house, Pryor. Besides there ain't much chance of anybody tryin' somethin' in broad daylight with all this crowd around."

"They'll try anything now," the Rio Kid growled. "Come along with us for chow, then I'm takin' yuh back to Silver Smith's. If yuh leave again, I'll tie yuh there."

Cramer growled impatiently and touched his gun.

"I ain't had my fangs pulled."

"A bushwhack bullet is plumb surprisin'," the Rio Kid replied shortly.

They had dinner, then loafed a while at the counter, smoking and talking in low tones. At last the Rio Kid arose.

"Time to get yuh back to safety, Cramer. Let's get along."

CELESTINO went out the door first, the Rio Kid following him. Cramer was still in the doorway when the Rio Kid spun halfaround at the crack of a rifle. Splinters jumped from the frame beside him. Cramer instinctively leaped to one side and a lead slug buzzed through the space he had just occupied.

"Bushwhack!" the Rio Kid yelled. "Hit for cover!"

The street crowd seemed to melt as if by magic. Cramer caught sight of a wisp of smoke from a second-story window across the street. He glimpsed a black bearded face.

"Unger!"

The name was wrenched from his lips. Nevada's rifle dropped in line and Cramer hastily swept his six from the holster. The Rio Kid and Celestino plunged across the street in a daring attempt to reach the killer.

Cramer felt his Colt buck back against his fist as he pulled the trigger. At the same moment, Unger's rifle spat flame toward him.

A white hot iron seared across Cramer's arm and he knew he had been hit. But his eyes remained riveted on the window. Unger had spasmodically straightened. He stood there a moment, like a statue.

Then he suddenly crumpled forward. His shoulder broke the glass and he hung stationary. Then his body slid down, jack-knifed forward. In horrible slow motion, Nevada Unger pitched out the window and dropped to the wooden plank sidewalk below.

The Rio Kid plunged on into the building. Nevada was dead, but if he had holed up here, maybe Colt Barlow would be around.

The Rio Kid pounded up a flight of narrow stairs. Guns in hand, he came to a short hall, broken by three closed doors. He kicked open the one that opened on the room overlooking the street. Nevada Unger's fallen gun lay in the dust by the broken window.

Grim-faced, the Rio Kid searched the other rooms. They were empty. In the one at the back stood a cot with a rumpled, dirty blanket. Cigarette butts and a discarded tobacco sack told that this had been Nevada's hideout. There was no sign that anyone else had ever been here.

CHAPTER XV

Murder Charge

RETURNING to the street, the Rio Kid saw that a crowd had gathered around Nevada's body, with Cramer and Celestino in the center of it.

"That was good shooting, Cramer," the Rio Kid said. "I reckon we'll never know whether he was gunnin' for you, or for me, or both of us. Tex ought to be around."

A well-dressed man sauntered out of Consolidated Hamilton and carefully edged his way into the center of the crowd. Few paid him any attention and the Rio Kid didn't notice him. He gave the fallen man only a cold, brief glance but studied the Rio Kid closely.

Then the crowd parted for a beautiful, breathless girl. She plunged into the cleared space and pulled up short, expelling her breath in infinite relief.

"I heard you had been shot!" she exclaimed to the Rio Kid.

"Yuh'd better leave, Betty," he said gently. "This ain't no place for a girl."

He took her arm to lead her away. In that moment, the well-dressed stranger saw the

marshal shove through the crowd. Tex stopped short. His eyes blazed when he saw the Rio Kid's hand on Betty's arm.

"Take yore hands off her!" he snapped.

"Hold it, Tex," the Rio Kid said quietly. "I was just getting her out of this mess."

"Take yore hands off," Tex growled.

The Rio Kid flushed angrily and dropped his arm.

"Yuh'd better go on, Miss Betty," he said. "Otherwise, there might be trouble."

Her face flamed, but she held her head high. She gave Tex Adams a scathing look and silently walked through the lane that parted for her.

"Yuh made nice talk," the Rio Kid said, low and bitterly, and as Tex flushed Pryor said: "It's Nevada Unger. His drygulch backfired on him. Cramer got him dead center from across the street."

The stranger edged away from the ring of curious, gawking men. He returned to the Consolidated Hamilton office but before he entered he turned and thoughtfully scowled at the street crowd. With sudden determination, he walked away toward the closed Treasure Saloon.

He entered a little doorway at one side of the main entrance and climbed a narrow stairs that opened on a wide hallway. The door that opened on the stairs to the closed saloon below was fitted with a shiny new hasp and padlock. The stranger glanced at it sardonically and opened another door without knocking.

Three men in the ornate office whirled around. The stranger leaned back against the door he had closed behind him. His face had grown dark with displeasure and wrath. Jed Harker relaxed.

"It's you, Sharon. I wish yuh'd knock."

Colt Barlow let his six drop back in the holster. Judge Ransdale reached for a bottle on a table close at hand.

"As fine a bunch of failures as I've seen in some time," Sharon purred softly. "One lone man has whipped you to a frazzle and got you all running."

Harker cursed. "Our plans got upset!" he blazed.

Sharon looked long and hard at him and Harker's eyes dropped under the accusing gaze. Sharon wilted Judge Ransdale with a single contemptuous flick of his eyes. Colt Barlow had turned his back to the financier and watched Harker.

Sharon didn't raise his voice as he spoke to Harker.

"Look at you! A man who promised me not long ago to have Hamilton eating out of his hand. His saloons are padlocked, his men scattered and he's got just about as much power as any ragged prospector in the street."

Sharon turned his head slightly and looked down at Ransdale.

"That's right, Judge. Hit the bottle hard. It'll make you forget the bluff that was run on you in your own courtroom."

Barlow growled as Sharon faced him. But Sharon laughed.

"And the gunman! The fastest man in Nevada, the man who could lay slick traps that took care of people who got in his way! Wounded in a barroom brawl. Swift gunplay in a sure-fire trap blew back in his face and now he sulks around corners like a whipped dog."

Barlow came convulsively to his feet. His gun swept out of the holster.

"I ought to salivate yuh!" he snarled.

"Put up the gun, Barlow," Sharon said, without a trace of fear. "I'm not the Rio Kid."

BARLOW muttered a curse and shoved his gun back in leather. Ransdale reached for the bottle, caught Sharon's sardonic glance, and thought better of the idea.

"Sharon, I ain't beat yet," Harker pleaded. "Yuh'll get yore rich claims. Silver Smith lost a heap of *dinero* when we hit that bullion shipment. As soon as we locate Alf Cramer, we'll turn his claim over to yore company."

"For your information," Sharon said brusquely, "Cramer just found one of your men. He killed Navada Unger."

"That was the shootin'!" Barlow exclaimed.

"I hadn't planned on that," Harker said dolefully.

"No, you hadn't," Sharon snapped. "There's little you did plan on. Any idea how we can use Unger's death to our own advantage?"

Harker looked puzzled, and at last shook his head.

"No, reckon not."

Sharon threw his arms over his head in a gesture of defeat.

"All right, I'll take charge. You'll have me to thank if you have so much as one saloon left. Cramer shot and killed Unger. We want Cramer so he can be forced to sign over his claim to you."

"But we can't reach him," Harker said.

"We can," Sharon said shortly. "Ransdale, you're going to issue a warrant charging Alf Cramer with murder in the first degree. The marshal will serve it. You will also issue a writ charging Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, with being accessory to the murder."

"Me!" Ransdale exclaimed.

"You're still judge," Sharon reminded. "I can stop any investigation of your affairs at the capital. Make out the warrants, now—and hand them to the marshal."

"But Tex Adams is hand in glove with the Rio Kid and that bunch," Harker argued.

"Is he?" Sharon asked. "You're blind, too, Jed. Tex Adams is eaten up with jealousy of the Rio Kid. I saw that today. He hates the man and I think I can help that hate along. Get over to your office, Ransdale, and get those warrants made out. I'll see you at Adams' place—and he'll make good on them."

Sharon left and walked swiftly down the street. He slowed as he came to the jail, looked in and smiled at the frowning young peace officer.

"Hello, Marshal. I'm William Sharon, from Virginia City."

Adams came to his feet, uncertain how to receive the man. His eyes mirrored a suspicion that Sharon quickly noticed. But he stepped in the office, talking cheerily.

"I saw you in action a short while ago. Who was the man in blue, with the two guns?"

"The Rio Kid," Tex growled.

"I've heard of him," Sharon nodded. "Quite a ladies' man. None of them seem able to resist him." He paused, then added innocently, "I see he's following the old pattern here."

"What yuh mean?" Tex demanded, fists clenched.

Sharon looked surprised. "Say, maybe I shouldn't have said that. Is he a good friend of yours?"

"I—yes," Tex fumbled. "That is, I know him."

"Well, in that case," Sharon said airily, "I can go on. As I came down the street, I saw him with a very beautiful girl. Say, come to think of it, I saw her in the crowd when that man was shot."

Tex leaned forward. "Yuh're shore?"

"I think so," Sharon answered. He glanced toward the door. Ransdale should be here and Adams had easily been worked into a nice fury. "Yes, it *was* the same girl."

Ransdale came in. He walked importantly to the desk and dropped two legal forms before Adams' surprised eyes.

"Warrants, Marshal, that I have issued. You will make the arrests. Alf Cramer is wanted on charge of murder, Bob Pryor on a charge of being accessory to aforesaid murder."

Tex groped for the papers.

"Murder? No, that's not right. The Rio Kid told me—"

"Hearsay," Sharon put in smoothly. "That's not your job, Marshal, to hear evidence. You have only to make the arrests. I'm sure the trial will bring out the facts. You'll find the Rio Kid with that girl."

Adams scooped up the papers and jammed on his hat. He stormed out the door, his face as dark as a thundercloud. Sharon smiled softly and looked speculatively at Ransdale.

"Now if I can keep you on the bench and sober until this comes to a head we're all right. . . ."

UNFORTUNATELY for the Rio Kid, Tex Adams found him at Silver Smith's home. He had not gone there with Betty but had angrily escorted Cramer home and was giving the man warning to stay under cover. When Tex stalked in the Rio Kid instantly knew something was wrong.

"Both of yuh are under arrest," Tex snapped. "Murder and accessory to the fact."

"Who's warrant?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Issued legal, by Judge Ransdale," Tex said.

"That's not true!" Betty exclaimed from the doorway.

The sound of her voice seemed to strengthen something ugly in Tex Adams' face. He spoke to her harshly.

"Stay out of this!" He turned to the Rio Kid. "Yuh comin' peaceful?"

"Yuh're making a mistake, Tex," Pryor said calmly. "You know Unger tried to bushwhack us."

"That ain't my job," Tex stubbornly parroted Sharon. "The trial will bring that out. Hand over yore guns or I'll take 'em from yuh."

Celestino made a swift move but the Rio Kid checked him. He stared hard at Tex.

"I know what's botherin' you, and yuh're wrong. I'm not goin' to fight with yuh, so here's my guns. But no man takes 'em from me."

He gave swift instructions to Betty for her to get Silver Smith. He or Donner could come to the jail.

"Let's go, Tex," he said then. "Yuh're goin' to regret this."

CHAPTER XVI

Frame-Up

QUIET and grim, the foursome walked toward the jail. Celestino stood scowling as Tex ushered his prisoners into a cell and locked the door. The Mexican looked at the lawman with such scorn that Tex flushed and brusquely ordered him out of the jail.

Tex sank down at his desk. The silence from the cells was more condemning than any shouting could have been. Tex squirmed uncomfortably. He tried to reassure himself with the legal warrants and thoughts of Betty. It didn't work too well. He was glad when Sharon came in.

"Marshal," Sharon said, "there's a man down at Consolidated who can give you some more information about this trouble. I told him I'd ask you to come down."

Tex followed Sharon, still chatting amiably, down the street. They turned into the offices of Consolidated Hamilton and Sharon led the way to a rear room. He threw open the door and stepped aside, waving Tex within.

The marshal stepped inside the room and a gun was jammed into his side.

"Lift 'em high and quick!" Colt Barlow growled. "No tricks!"

Tex froze. The gun bore deeper and Tex slowly raised his hands. Barlow emptied his holster, then Sharon came into the room, clos-

ing the door. Jed Harker moved from a far corner and Hal Telow waited impassively, leaning against the far wall.

"What's the idea?" Tex snapped.

"A little insurance," Sharon smiled. "You might change your mind about the Rio Kid and Alf Cramer. We want them to stay in jail, for a while, at least."

"Why shouldn't they? I arrested them."

"True"—Sharon smiled—"but the Rio Kid might disclose that he wasn't with the lovely Betty Smith. My own invention, Adams, to prod you into a little action. Now friend Telow will take charge of the jail and we needn't worry about the prisoners being released."

Telow shifted uncomfortably under Tex' blazing, scornful glance. On Harker's thick lips was a little smile of triumph.

"Take him to the hideout, Colt," Sharon said. "And oh yes, Adams—you will be in the company of the charming Betty Smith. Maybe you can help her persuade her father to sell his claim to Mr. Harker. It would shorten her stay considerably."

Tex took a swift step forward, then pulled up short when he heard the click of Barlow's six.

"Yuh got everything figgered," he said quietly. "Yuh even had me figgered as a locoed jealous fool. Well, yuh'll pay for it. I ain't certain how, but yuh will. Now let me give you a word of warnin'. Don't give me a chance to get loose."

"We won't." Sharon nodded agreeably. "Better get him out of sight, Colt. We have things to do."

At Colt Barlow's prodding, Tex left by a rear door. Sharon swung around to Hal Telow.

"Don't let anyone see the prisoners. If we can hold them until we get things under control, that's all we care about. Get going."

Telow hurried to the jail and started back to the cell blocks. He halted when he heard voices. His shifty eyes glittered and he came bustling into the corridor.

Donner and Silver Smith whirled around to face the deputy. Telow glimpsed Celestino and the newspaperman beyond them. Smith looked worried and haggard.

"Where's Tex?" he asked.

"I dunno. He told me to take charge here for a while. He's ridin' out for some evidence somewheres."

Smith smacked his fist into his palm.

"I got to find him! Betty's disappeared."

"Pryor and Cramer should be released!" Donner roared. "This charge of murder is ridiculous."

Telow helplessly shook his head. "Shucks, I can't release them men without a court order. You get one from the judge and I'll be mighty glad to let 'em go."

Donner pushed by him angrily.

"Smith, we'd better look for Tex. We've got to do something. We'll never find the judge."

The two men left and Clemens hastened after them. Celestino stayed, but Telow jerked his thumb toward the outer door.

"Yuh can't stay here, *amigo*. Besides, there ain't nothing yuh can do right now."

CELESTINO started to protest but the Rio Kid reached through the bars and touched his arm.

"Better do as he says, *amigo*. You follow out orders and I'll be out of here."

"What orders?" Telow blurted.

The Rio Kid grinned. "Just a little idea of mine. *Hasta la vista*, Celestino."

As the young Mexican cut around the deputy toward the door, Telow made a slight gesture to his holstered six as though to stop him. Then he dropped his hand and Celestino was gone.

Telow grinned at his prisoner.

"Make yoreself comfortable, Rio Kid. Yuh'll be here for a while and I reckon there's few visitors yuh're goin' to see. I got orders about that."

"From Tex?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Shore—from Tex." Telow's grin widened. "Yuh shouldn't have seen so much of his girl."

The Rio Kid didn't answer. He threw himself on the narrow hard cot, stared up at the ceiling, then closed his eyes as though he had gone to sleep. Telow chuckled and went back to the office, locking the barred corridor door after him.

Silence in the little cell block for a long time, then the Rio Kid arose and walked to the bars. His voice was low, barely carrying to the next cell.

"Cramer, yuh're goin' to get an offer for yore claim."

"How yuh figger?" Cramer asked wearily.

"Jed Harker or Bill Sharon will walk in here by tomorrow. Yuh'll be told yuh won't have a chance at a murder trial, but yuh can escape if yuh sign over yore claim to Jed Harker."

Cramer cursed and the Rio Kid warned him to lower his voice.

"Wait until Tex Adams shows up!" Cramer whispered harshly. "I'm shore goin' to let that doublecrossin' buzzard know what he's done."

"I doubt if yuh see Tex—at least while we're in jail."

"Huh?" Cramer grunted in surprise. "What yuh mean?"

"I figger we're in a pretty trap, Cramer. Every sign reads that way. Betty Smith is missin'. The two of us is in jail. Tex is supposed to be ridin' the hills somewheres. Who's left in Hamilton to fight Harker?"

After a long silence Cramer answered softly:

"Not a dad-blamed person!"

"That's right. Betty may be the price of Silver's claim. Yore freedom will be the price of yores. This deputy is goin' to see that we stay right here in these cells. There ain't a thing that can stop Harker, unless it's Duggan."

"Yuh think he will?" Cramer asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't bet a dollar Mexican on it. Them polecats are goin' to pull Martin's fangs if they can. Right now Harker holds every ace in the deck."

"We're whipped, I reckon," Cramer sighed. "Ain't much of a chance wigglin' out of this."

The Rio Kid laughed grimly. "I think Harker forgot the joker in this deal of his. Celestino will play it for me and we might take the trick. Just hang and rattle and agree to nothin'."

The time passed with torturous slowness. Once they heard Donner arguing loudly in the office, but the big storekeeper was not admitted to the cell block. A little later, Telow brought in trays of food. He made the Rio Kid go to the far wall before he unlocked the door and gingerly placed the tray on the floor inside.

Watching them eat, Telow rolled a quirly, lighted it, and blew smoke through his nostrils.

"Tex ain't come back yet," he said. "I've heard talk he's done left town for good."

"Was it Harker's talk?" the Rio Kid asked.

Telow flushed and walked away.

About an hour later, he came back. Jed Harker and Colt Barlow followed him. Both men stared at the Rio Kid. Barlow's red face beamed. His thick lips parted in a wide grin.

"Well, the holy terror shore has his wings clipped. A heap of folks would never believe this." He ended vindictively, "I hope they hang yuh."

"Not me, Colt. The rope has done been saved for yore thick neck."

BARLOW laughed mockingly and the two men went to Cramer's cell. The Rio Kid heard Telow's key turn in the lock. Jed Harker's voice held a note of mocking sadness.

"I shore hate to see yuh in jail, Cramer. I reckon yuh just got in the wrong company."

"Say what yuh got to, Harker," growled the miner, "then get out. The sight of yuh makes me plumb sick."

"It'd be best if yuh listened, Cramer." Harker's voice hardened. "We got yuh plumb between a forked stick and all yuh can do is wiggle. I got a proposition to make to yuh."

"Name it and get out," Cramer snapped.

"Judge Ransdale has set yore trial for murder for the day after tomorrow. A jury has already been picked. Yuh ain't got a chance, Cramer, of missin' a hang-noose."

"Justice!" Cramer spat.

"I ain't carin' what yuh call it. I could fix it so's yuh wouldn't be sent to the gallows. I reckon the jury could figger yuh was innocent if I said so. But it'll cost."

"How much?" Cramer demanded.

"Here's a bill of sale all made out legal. It needs yore signature. It makes over yore silver claim to me. Was yuh to sign this, there wouldn't be no trouble a-tall. Judge Ransdale might dismiss the case for lack of evidence."

"I'll not sign it," Cramer said decisively.

Harker's voice remained smooth but there was the thin edge of threat to it.

"I won't take that as final, Cramer. Mebbe yuh want to think it over. I'll be back in the mornin'."

"Yuh needn't bother. I still won't sign."

"We'll see. Day after tomorrow yuh go on trial for yore life. What happens is entirely up to you. Yuh ain't got much time to be stubborn. *Adios,* Cramer."

Their boots made scuffling noises as they arose. The door lock clicked, then Harker and Barlow came into the Rio Kid's line of vision. He smiled crookedly at Harker.

"What d'yuh want from me?" he asked.

"Not a thing," Harker answered grimly. "Yuh had yore chance and wouldn't take it. Yuh're as good as hung right now."

After Harker and Barlow had gone, Cramer paced his cell and cursed with monotonous regularity. The Rio Kid remained stretched out on his cot, hands clasped under his head, lithe body relaxed. But his blue eyes snapped as his thoughts tackled the new and dangerous problem that confronted him.

Celestino could not be back within five days, and the Rio Kid's trial was to come up day after tomorrow. It would be a farce, but still deadly. If Barlow's gunnies were in the jury box, there could be no question of their verdict.

The Rio Kid was unarmed, behind bars. Harker had moved swiftly and cleverly to remove every chance of help reaching him. Pryor thought of Telow and angrily turned on his side. He should have suspected that the deputy was in Harker's pay.

Neither Clemens nor Duggan would be allowed to reach him. Donner and Smith could do little and old Silver would be worried about his daughter. Harker might even now be offering the girl's safe return for Silver's claim.

Suddenly the Rio Kid sat up. Harker could not afford to let a single one of them live. That would mean his own evil neck in a hang-noose. Harker would wait only until he had the bills of sale safely signed, then he would see that they all were killed.

Tex and Betty would be found some day out in the hills. The Rio Kid and Cramer could be cold-bloodedly shot down and Telow would claim a jail break. A knife wielder like Manuel could dispose of Silver Smith and Donner. That would sweep the board clean, leaving Harker safe to enjoy his gains and Bill Sharon to sell his stock when he fully controlled the Hamilton Mines.

The Rio Kid calmly faced the facts and calmly tried to find some way out of the trouble. Panic would not help. He realized that only by taking advantage of some slight slip could he hope to escape. And that slip would have to come to him.

The Rio Kid rolled over and closed his eyes. In a few moments, he slept.

CHAPTER XVII

Escape

KNOCKING at the barred door, Telow awakened the Rio Kid. Sunlight streamed in the cell window and the deputy held a breakfast tray. The lawman again took precautions and covered the Rio Kid with his six for the few seconds the door was open. Then he went on to Cramer's cell.

The Rio Kid had just finished when he heard the sudden blasting roar of six-guns. They were close, yet muffled as though fired within a nearby building. Then they roared again. The Rio Kid tried to peer out the window. He could see no more than a fraction of the street, but he saw men running. He returned to his cot and lay down again.

Martin Duggan's angry voice brought him upright. In the office the special deputy was bellowing at something Telow said.

"Deputy," Duggan declared, "I'm puttin' these snakes in a cell, savvy? I'm gettin' mighty tired jawin' with yuh. Do I take 'em to a cell or not?"

"Yuh're no longer special marshal," Telow growled. "Yuh ain't got the power to arrest these men."

"This six is all the power I need, hombre. Yuh're lookin' right at it. Now lead the way to them cells before I lose my head and tear yuh plumb apart!"

Telow tried to argue but Duggan's angry growl cut him short. The door opened and the men came down the corridor. The Rio Kid, standing at the bars, saw that Duggan's prisoners were two more of Barlow's gunswifts, but they looked much the worse for wear.

Telow angrily jerked open a cell door and the men shuffled inside. He locked it. Duggan turned, saw the Rio Kid. His mouth dropped open in sheer surprise, then he loosed a roar that shook the building.

"What's he doin' in jail? Have yuh gone plumb loco!"

"Accessory to murder," Telow snapped. "Tex Adams arrested him."

Duggan's eyes narrowed. He strode up to the Rio Kid, and when he caught sight of Cramer his astonishment grew. He snapped around to Telow and froze. The deputy had him covered with a gun.

"I ain't wanting any trouble, Duggan," Telow growled. "Just shuck yore six and hand it over, slow and easy. Then yuh can hit out of here. Hamilton has changed, Duggan. Jed Harker gives the orders now."

Duggan stood motionless, his Irish eyes glittering. He shot a swift glance at the Rio Kid as he pulled his gun slowly from the holster. Telow's finger tightened on the trigger. Duggan smiled.

"Yuh ain't got nothin' to worry about. Yuh got the drop. Here's my gun."

He held it out. But as Telow reached for the weapon Duggan exploded into action. He swept Telow's gun aside. It blasted into the floor. Duggan's gun barrel cracked off Telow's chin. The deputy collapsed.

Duggan roughly rolled him over and got the keys. He opened the Rio Kid's cell and ceremoniously waved Pryor to freedom. Then he dragged Telow inside by the shirt collar and dumped him on the floor, and locked the cell.

"I hope they forget to look for a week," he growled.

He released Alf Cramer and the three men went to the office. Duggan locked the barred corridor door and hung the jail keys on a peg. He closed the street door and turned the key.

"Now we won't be bothered. I reckon yuh'd better tell me what's been happenin'."

The Rio Kid sketched Harker's moves and the part Bill Sharon had played. Duggan was staring in sheer amazement when the story had finished. He struck his knee and swore.

"I been plumb busy. I missed Tex and the rest of yuh but figgered mebbe yuh was at Silver's. It seemed like all of a sudden them renegade gunslammers came out of their holes and I tried to jail 'em."

"It's a wonder Barlow didn't try to set a gun trap," the Rio Kid marveled. "Yuh're the only one in their way."

"He did, I reckon. Them two jaspers I brung in was what was left of a little party in the saloon next door." Duggan's grin vanished. "But what are yuh plannin' to do?"

"Guns first," the Rio Kid said. "Alf, I reckon yuh got to take yore chances with the rest of us, and I don't like that. Harker wants yore hide worse'n he does mine."

"Just give me a six," Cramer gritted. "I'll take care of my own hide and back any play yuh name."

THE Rio Kid opened the closet behind the desk and glanced over the rack of rifles and Colts. He picked three, passed one to Cramer. The other two he shoved in his own holsters after loading them. He looked up, face grim.

"We've got to find out where Betty Smith and Tex Adams are. Jed Harker's got the answer to that question so I reckon we'll take a little pasear to his office."

"There's a heap of outlaw sixes down there," Duggan suggested. "Harker's opened his saloons again."

The Rio Kid nodded. "Yes, and there's a side entrance up to Jed's office."

Duggan unlocked the door. At that moment they heard Telow shout from the cell. Duggan grinned.

"We've made a good start. Now let's get Harker."

The three men slipped into the crowd and worked their way toward the Treasure's side entrance. The Rio Kid ducked into the doorway, Duggan and Cramer pushing hard on his heels.

Pryor's keen eyes cut upward into the shadows at the head of the narrow stairs. Noise from the big saloon pounded through the walls but no one moved above.

The Rio Kid eased his sixes from leather and catfooted upward. The hall was empty but now the noise from below seemed to ascend in waves up the other stairs.

In a few strides, the Rio Kid was at the closed door of Harker's office. He signaled Duggan to take post so he could command the hall and both stairways. The Rio Kid boldly opened the door and stepped into the room. It was empty.

"Duggan!" Pryor called. "You and Cramer in here! Pronto!"

The three seated themselves and the Rio Kid watched the closed door. They were three grim avengers, six-guns naked in their hands, determination glinting in their hard eyes.

Only a few moments had passed when there was a heavy tread outside. Harker's voice boomed an order, then he laughed. The Rio Kid shot a quick glance at his friends, smiled bleakly and fastened his eyes on the door.

It swung open and Harker came in. For a moment he didn't see his visitors. Then he stopped short as though a fist had slugged him. His mouth dropped open and he stared speechless at the three men. Their sixes covered him.

"Howdy, Jed," the Rio Kid drawled. "Yuh're goin' on a little pasear."

Harker caught his breath and swallowed. The surprise left his eyes to be replaced by a mocking light. He carefully pulled a cigar from his pocket and bit off the end.

"This is a surprise, but I'm glad it happened. Yuh won't get out here alive."

The Rio Kid arose. "We'll do our best, Jed. Turn around while I pull yore fangs."

He pulled the six out of the gun-belt under Harker's long coat, and found a hideout gun at his shoulder. Harker took the search calmly. Finally the Rio Kid stood back.

"I reckon yuh can't bite now. We're walking out of here, Jed, and down them side steps. If any of yore sidewinders try gunplay, yuh'd better discourage 'em pronto. My first slug is marked with yore name. Savvy?"

Harker grinned. "I savvy a bluff. Yuh got to keep me alive to find out where Betty Smith and Tex Adams is. I'm promisin' nothin', Pryor."

The Rio Kid's lips set in a harsh, straight line.

"Don't place all yore chips on that card, Harker. There's many a gent in Boot Hill who made just one mistake."

The knob suddenly rattled and the door swung open. The three men swung around, guns lining down on the paunchy figure framed in the doorway. The Rio Kid chuckled.

"Come in, Judge. Yuh're just in time for a little walk."

Ransdale's fat face paled and his pudgy hands shot into the air as Duggan slapped his clothing for guns. He carried none.

"Down the side stairs and around the back," the Rio Kid ordered briefly. "Then to Silver Smith's place. Yuh'd both better go without trouble. It'll be healthier."

Ransdale's red nose twitched nervously as he nodded. Duggan threw open the door and stepped out into the hall. Ransdale and Harker followed with Cramer and the Rio Kid bringing up the rear.

Duggan and the prisoners passed the stairs leading to the saloon and Duggan had reached the far end of the hallway when the Rio Kid halted, to look down into the saloon. At that moment two gunmen came to the steps and looked upward.

"The Rio Kid!" one squawked.

Both stabbed for their guns. The Rio Kid's Colts blurred from leather.

"Get them out!" he snapped to Cramer. "I'll hold these jaspers and cover yuh!"

HIS guns blasted down the stairs. Harker tried to swing around, but Cramer's jabbing gun barrel changed his mind. He clattered down the other stairs behind Duggan. White-faced, Ransdale followed. Cramer brought up the rear, face tight.

Gunhawk lead burned upward, but the Rio Kid drove the two men back. He could hear shouts of alarm and the pound of feet as more of Barlow's gunnies cut across the saloon to the stairs.

The Rio Kid's face set as he crouched by the rail. The longer he held the attention of Barlow and his men the more time Duggan and Cramer had to get safely away with their prisoners. Men suddenly boiled up the stairs, guns blazing.

The Rio Kid sent a hail of lead down in reply. Men screamed. Two in the van dropped under his deadly slugs and their bodies fell back on those behind them. The Rio Kid's lead broke up the charge and for a moment the stairwell was cleared except for men who would move no more.

Pryor's lips twisted in a mirthless smile when he heard Colt Barlow's bellow. He hoped the ringleader would try to lead the next assault. He wanted Barlow in his gun-sights just once.

The silence below broke with a sudden blast of gunfire. It was so concentrated that the Rio Kid had to jump back across the hall. The stair rail seemed to vanish in a burst of flying splinters. Plaster jumped from the wall above the Rio Kid's head. He crouched, tensed, making no attempt to return the fire. He understood Colt's plan.

Abruptly the gunfire lessened. Instantly the Rio Kid leaped across the hall. His sixes

spewed death down the stairs up which the renegades again tried to charge. A hot brand cut along his cheek, another tugged at his sleeve. But both his sixes snarled and his bullets slammed into evil, outlaw faces. They melted away in the writhing gunsmoke.

The Rio Kid ran to Harker's office. Duggan and Cramer should be safely away by now. Barlow would soon remember the second stairway and send up a two-pronged attack that would catch the Rio Kid between fires.

Pryor jumped across the office and slammed up the window. The wall dropped sheer to the ground below. A quick glance told the Rio Kid that no one watched this part of the building. He swung a leg out the window, twisted around and lowered himself until he hung by his hands from the window-sill.

Gunfire again swept up the stairs. The Rio Kid let go. He dropped to hands and knees, scrambled to his feet, and ran to the shelter of the next building. He halted there a moment, then darted over to the next street. He grinned when he thought of Barlow's anger when the gunman found his prey was gone. He would probably tear Hamilton apart to find his enemy, particularly when he discovered that Harker and Ransdale were missing.

It did not take the Rio Kid long to work his way to Silver Smith's house. The old man admitted him and waved silently to the front room. Harker and Ransdale sat silent and stiff under the vigilant eyes of Duggan and Cramer. Both guards looked relieved when the Rio Kid came in.

"Where have yuh taken the girl?" Pryor asked immediately.

Harker sneered at him, and remained silent. Ransdale kept his eyes glued on the carpet. The Rio Kid quickly decided which of the two would crack first. He turned to Silver Smith.

"Get a bunch of honest men together, Silver. Saddle up and bring hosses for us. Meet us down the road here, a mile out of town. We'll be ready to get yore daughter."

"Confident, ain't yuh?" Harker asked heavily.

Silver Smith ran for the door. The Rio Kid pulled Ransdale to his feet. The man looked sick with fright and Pryor's grim face made him shiver as the Rio Kid pulled him down the hall and into the kitchen. The Rio Kid shoved the pudgy man roughly across the room and he caught himself at the table. When he straightened, the Rio Kid's six bored into his stomach.

"You—can't kill me!" Ransdale gasped.

"Can't I?" the Rio Kid asked coldly. He dogged back the hammer of the gun and the click hit Ransdale's ears with the impact of a thunderbolt. "Yuh tried to railroad me twice, once to jail, and this time to a hang-noose. Why shouldn't I salivate yuh?"

COLD sweat beaded Ransdale's forehead. His tongue seemed to stick to the roof of his mouth. He made futile, frightened gestures with his pudgy hands.

"Where has Harker taken Betty and Tex?" the Rio Kid demanded.

Ransdale managed to control his voice. "I—I can't tell you. Harker or Barlow—would kill me."

The Rio Kid shrugged. He stepped back a pace and the six settled more firmly in his fist.

"I ain't got time to waste. Do yuh want to take this lookin' at it, or would yuh rather turn yore back? Make up yore mind, for I'm shore pullin' this trigger."

"Wait!" Ransdale croaked. "Don't shoot! I'll tell! They're at the hut of the breed named Manuel. Harker and Sharon wanted them close so they could be guarded easy."

"Sharon's back of all this, ain't he?" the Rio Kid asked.

Ransdale suddenly spouted a torrent of words. He told of the agreement between Harker and Sharon, the one to get the mines, the other the town. He told of Sharon's moves to trap all of those who opposed him, how he had played on Adams' jealousy for Betty to get the Rio Kid in jail. When he stopped, gasping for breath, the Rio Kid shoved his six back in leather.

He pushed Ransdale back to the other room. Harker realized that his henchman had told everything. Harker's lips writhed in silent threat and Ransdale shrank away from him.

"Go meet Silver out on the road," the Rio Kid said to Cramer. "Bring the men here. I reckon we can stop this whole thing if we act quick."

As Cramer left Duggan and the Rio Kid sat down to watch their prisoners. Shivering, Ransdale tried to edge away from Harker. Jed stared darkly into the fireplace and absently toyed with his watch-chain. He looked up, meeting the Rio Kid's direct look.

"From here it looks like yuh've won, Pryor," Harker said. "I don't savy how yuh done it. I have every card in my hand."

"I've had brushes with gents like you before," the Rio Kid answered, "and they all make the same big mistakes. First, yuh got too shore. Yuh figgered a heap of Colts and a heap of killers meant everything. Second, there was too many yuh had to trust and work with—like Hal Telow, in jail, Nevada Unger, dead, Judge Ransdale here. If any one of 'em talked, yore whole play was exposed."

Harker nodded. "Yuh're forgettin' Colt Barlow. He's still loose."

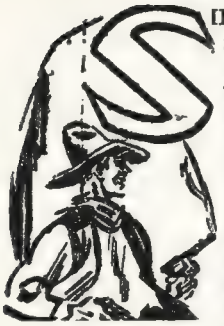
"I haven't forgotten him. I hope to meet him before the day's over."

"Yuh will," Harker said, almost contentedly.

Next Issue: BOOTS AND A STETSON, a Story by Richard Brister

CHAPTER XVIII

Renegade Roundup



SILVER SMITH and his men rode up. They trooped into the house and the Rio Kid told them what he had learned. Quickly he sketched a plan of action to which all of them agreed.

"We stand to win," the Rio Kid said slowly, "if we handle this right. Yuh agreed I should lead yuh. Keep that in mind when we corner these renegades. If yuh don't, Colt Barlow will split us wide open and we're finished. Let's ride."

"How about these jaybirds?" Duggan asked, nodding at Harker and Ransdale.

"We'll let them keep Telow company in jail," the Rio Kid snapped.

They trooped out to the horses. Duggan jerked his thumb toward the door and Ransdale scuttled out. Harker slowly arose, his eyes glittering. But as he walked out onto the porch he tugged at his coat sleeve as though to pull it below his wrist.

The Rio Kid, mounted on Saber, impatiently watched the prisoners approach. He watched Ransdale pull himself into the saddle. Harker was out of his sight for a moment. Saber shivered at the same instant that Duggan shouted:

"Watch out! He's got a hideout!"

The Rio Kid swung around. He had only a glimpse of Harker's twisted face, the arm flashing down. The Rio Kid flung himself sideward. A burst of flame and smoke came from Harker's deadly little sleeve gun. Powder burned the Rio Kid's face and the smoke blinded him a second. When his vision cleared Harker was running madly down the street. Duggan swore and Cramer fought his horse as it tried to bolt. The Rio Kid's hand dropped to his holster but Duggan's six blasted first.

Harker came high up on his toes. He took three more running steps, then started doubling. His legs grew rubbery and he sprawled in the dust.

The Rio Kid rode forward, pulled up beside Harker and jumped from saddle. He saw where Duggan's slug had struck between the wide shoulder blades as he rolled Harker over. The man's eyes fluttered open and a slow smile touched his slack lips.

"I—made another mistake, Pryor. Too—shore again, I reckon. Yuh—yuh made a bet with me once. Yuh've won. It's me—shovels coal first."

His head suddenly lolled and he was dead. The Rio Kid slowly arose and looked up at the riders around him. He shrugged eloquently and a couple of them dismounted to take the body back to Smith's house. Ransdale looked green around the gills.

The Rio Kid led his band of grim fighting men in a wide circuit around the business center of the town. He hoped that Colt Barlow would still be busy searching in that area. That would mean less opposition to overcome in rescuing Betty and Tex Adams.

At last the Rio Kid pulled up and signaled the men close around him.

"The house is around the next corner. Duggan, you take half a dozen to the back. Silver, you can go with me. One of yuh stay with the judge. He won't be any bother."

Ransdale gladly settled back in the saddle. The Rio Kid waited until Duggan had picked his men and disappeared into the alley. Then he dismounted and with his companions went around the corner.

The hut was silent, doors and windows black. The Rio Kid walked steadily forward, hands brushing the twin guns at his side. The men behind him were alert and tense.

A shot sounded and the Rio Kid's hat sailed from his head. Instantly his sixes swept out and he started running a zigzag course toward the house.

Guns roared from the house. The attackers returned the fire, ducking to cover, darting forward to get closer. From beyond the house more guns started booming. Duggan had swung into action.

The Rio Kid, running through a hail of bullets, reached the protection of the corner of the hut next door. He knew he could not reach the hut where Tex and Betty were held. Outlaw bullets would down him before he would take half a dozen steps. He ran to the door, opening it on three frightened Mexicans who lay flat on the ground in fear.

The Rio Kid cut through the house and finally found a window that overlooked the side wall of the outlaw fort. He shoved up the window and climbed through. Here, between the houses, was comparative security, though from front and back guns snarled. There was a single narrow window in the outlaw hut on this side.

THE Rio Kid grimly crept forward. He eased himself up to the window and peered into a small room. Tex Adams was securely lashed to a chair and Betty Smith's wrists and ankles were lashed to the cot on which she lay. The Rio Kid's shadow caught their attention and the frightened girl looked up at him with hope.

With a blow of his gun the Rio Kid broke the glass. The steady fire, front and back, covered the sound. In another moment he was inside. He ran to the cot and cut the girl's bonds. Then he turned to help Tex.

"Yuh'll get killed!" Tex said urgently. "Barlow and all his crew's outside."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "No time to think about that now. Help me get this girl out through the window."

Tex stood up, rubbing circulation back into

his wrists and ankles. He straightened and helped Betty to the window. They eased her through and the Rio Kid pointed to the window in the other house. Betty nodded and ran for it.

The firing within the house was suddenly cut off.

"Hold them lead-slingin' sons!" came Colt Barlow's bellow. "I'll give 'em a glimpse of the girl and they won't throw so much lead."

Tex looked quickly at the Rio Kid who whirled as the door was thrown open. Barlow and three gunmen rushed in, pulled up short. Barlow's eyes widened and his red hair bristled when he saw the lithe, blue-clad figure.

"The Rio Kid!" he bawled.

His wrist snapped up. The Rio Kid faded quickly to one side, matched guns blurring up. The two renegades jerked for their hardware. Tex dropped flat against the wall, caught in the fight unarmed.

Barlow's first shot blasted through the window and his second cut plaster beside the Rio Kid's head. Pryor sent two quick shots his way, then spent a deadly second on the two renegades. One of them spilled forward, a black hole in his forehead. The other grabbed his stomach and doubled up.

Gunsmoke made vision hard in the dark little room. Barlow fired with vindictive precision. A slug ripped into the Rio Kid's left arm and it went limp. The six dropped from useless fingers. He crouched, lips drawn back in a fighting grimace. His right gun blasted at the spit of orange flame that jumped toward him.

Barlow's yell was cut off in a retching gurgle. His gun hit the floor and bounced. The big gunman clawed at his throat but his clutching fingers could not stop the flow of blood. Dimming eyes blazed hate at the Rio Kid and then he fell, like a giant tree finally cut down.

Tex Adams jumped to his feet. His eager hands swept up two of the sixes the renegades had dropped.

The Rio Kid, left arm dangling and bloody, grimly joined him as he leaped for the door, guns blazing.

Taken with stunning, killing surprise from within, the renegades knew panic. Some wild shots were thrown at the two lawmen, but the three sixes dropped four men in as many seconds. Slugs from outside chewed through the windows and doors. It was too much for the lobo pack to take. They threw down their guns and reached for the ceiling. . . .

The Rio Kid, bloody arm bandaged, led a triumphant band back to the center of town. Judge Ransdale was thrown in a cell and Cramer led two men to pick up William Sharon. Sam Clemens made notes, hair standing wildly over his head. Betty Smith remained close to Tex Adams, her fingers on his arm as though afraid he would vanish.

Cramer came back and made his report while the sawbones looked at the Rio Kid's arm.

"Sharon left. He must have figgered he'd lost and he shore didn't want any jail bars around him. Shall we get a posse after him?"

The Rio Kid shook his head. "No need to. He's finished."

"What about Consolidated Hamilton?" Clemens asked. "That's Sharon's company and it owns plenty of claims."

The Rio Kid flinched a little as the doctor probed at his wound, but his voice remained steady and strong.

"As soon as Doc gets through with me, call Donner and we'll go to Silver's house for a pow-wow." The Rio Kid looked up at Tex quizzically. "That is, unless Tex figgers I shouldn't go around the place."

ADAMS flushed and faced the Rio Kid.

"I'm a plumb locoed fool, Pryor," he said humbly, "and I owe yuh a heap of apologies. Me'n Betty had a chance to talk things over when Colt Barlow had us prisoner. She loves me and nobody else. I was just blind, I reckon."

"So was I," Betty said bravely, but flushed a little. "I—I was dazzled by your reputation, Captain Pryor. But when Tex was in danger, I knew he was the man I loved. We've caused you a lot of trouble. You'll forgive us?"

"Yuh're already forgiven." The Rio Kid smiled. He stood up when the doctor finished. "We got a few loose ends to tie up and we got to act fast. Let's get to Silver Smith's. . . ."

Once again they were in the big living room. Betty was in the kitchen, making coffee, and preparing a lunch for the tired men. Silver Smith and Jeremiah Donner sat before the fireplace, looking up at the Rio Kid. Duggan loafed by the window, a scowl on his face. Tex Adams remained by the hall door, every now and then stealing a glance at Betty as she hurried to and fro in the kitchen.

"When Harker had Cramer and me thrown in jail," the Rio Kid was saying, "I sent Celestino to Carson City with a full report of Judge Ransdale's misdeeds. Attorney Bryant went with him. They'll be back with a warrant of arrest for Ransdale, and a new judge to take his place. I figgered that would happen before Cramer's trial, but I reckon Sharon foresaw the move and hurried the trial date. But no harm done, now that the whole dirty mess is cleaned up."

"What about Sharon?" Donner asked.

"Let him go," the Rio Kid answered readily. "Bring suit for recovery of the mine claims against Consolidated Hamilton. The company won't fight it, for Sharon knows we can put him behind bars for years if he does. That'll straighten everything up and the rightful owners will get their claims back.

"Harker's dead, so's Colt Barlow. Their gunhawks are in jail or pounding leather out of here. Hamilton should be a law-abidin' town from now on. My job's done."

Donner cleared his throat. "We'd like for

yuh to stay on, Pryor. Yuh'd win the election for marshal hands down."

The Rio Kid shook his head and smiled. "Tex Adams is yore man. He's a seasoned law officer now. I'll wait until Celestino gets back with the warrant and the new judge. Then I'll be ridin' on."

"Which way?" Duggan asked abruptly, swinging around from the window.

"Wherever there's trouble, I reckon," the Rio Kid shrugged.

Duggan grinned and his strong Irish face lighted.

"I'll ride a ways with yuh. Hamilton is goin' to be too tame for me, and my job's done, too."

"Glad to have yuh, Duggan. The Rio Kid smiled.

"Yuh're a smilin' pervaricator, Rio Kid. You and that Celestino ride yore own trail. I'm a fightin' man, but you two lead too fast a life for me. I'll see yuh to Virginia City, then say *adios*. Yuh can herd yore own trouble from there on."

Clemens chuckled, then gravely watched the Rio Kid and spoke softly almost to himself.

"If the West had more like you, Captain Bob Pryor, evil and darkness would soon depart from it. Wherever you ride, I wish you luck, and may your guns be fast."

There was nothing more the rest could say.

Further Exploits of the Rio Kid and His Fighting Pards in

SIERRA GOLD

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The Rudioso Kid could threaten and kill, but couldn't have everything his own way!

PAYOFF AT PIUTE WELLS

By JOHN H. LATHAM

WEBB DANVERS, night telegraph operator at Piute Wells, looked up into the muzzle of a six-gun held in the Rudioso Kid's thin hand. Behind the slender, girlish-featured youth was a burly, black-bearded man wearing a mackinaw and hobnail boots.

"Up with 'em!" the Kid whispered thinly. "No noise. Lift his iron, Moose."

Webb slowly raised his hands, his faded blue eyes tense and watchful under the shade of his visor. Moose stepped behind Webb, yanked his forty-four from its worn holster.

"Now call Jiggs Cassidy," the Kid commanded softly. Webb turned to the express office.

"Come out, Jiggs," he called, and his voice was strained and flat.

He heard the guard's shuffling footsteps. Then Jiggs Cassidy came through the door, punching tobacco into his pipe. The old man saw the Rudioso Kid with his gun on Webb, and his mouth sagged open. He grabbed for his own weapon.

"Don't do it, Jiggs!" Webb cried sharply.

The Kid shifted his gun. Flame spurted from the muzzle, and the tele-

graph office echoed with the thunder of a shot. Gray-haired Jiggs Cassidy slumped to the floor, a blue-black hole between his bulging eyes.

A look of almost demoniac pleasure glinted in the Rudioso Kid's eyes.

"I'd like to give you the same!" he snarled, swinging his smoking six-gun to cover Webb. "Make a false move and I'll burn yuh down!"

Webb had started up from his seat, but sank back, sickened. He gritted his teeth against the rage that welled up in him. His life depended on keeping a cool head. Old Jiggs Cassidy's sprawling shape was mute testimony to that fact.

Webb knew all about the Rudioso Kid. The baby-eyed button's gun rep was down in black and white on reward dodgers all over the country.

"NOW open the safe," the Kid rasped.

"If I don't?" Webb queried, tight-lipped.

"Then I'll give you a lead ticket to hades!" the Kid blazed. "Me an' Moose can lug that safe off an' blow 'er open. That Piute Mine payroll is in greenbacks, an' the safe don't weigh more'n a hundred pounds. Better step or I'll salivate yore hide with bullets!"

Webb had his hands down now. He picked up a pencil and drummed on the desk. He always did that when he was thinking.

He knew the Rudioso Kid had this figured from every angle. The safe weighed less than ninety pounds, just an iron box. Piute Wells was a way station up in the Verde Hills, sixty miles from Baxter, the nearest town. Unless Webb managed to get word to Lin Bilbury, the lone deputy who kept the peace in Piute Wells, the outlaws would have ample time to carry the safe off and blow it open.

"Quit poundin' that pencil!" the Kid snarled. He thumbed back the hammer on his gun. "Get that safe open, *pronto!*"

"Okay, Kid," Webb answered, dropping the pencil. "You win. I'll open the safe."

"Quit stallin'!" Moose growled. "That low-down deputy may have heard the shot, an' come prowlin' around, Kid. I can see his house from the corner. I'll keep a lookout there."

Webb got up and limped into the express room, with the Rudioso Kid trailing him. Six months before, a vicious, man-killing bronc had laid Webb up with a broken leg. The bone hadn't been set right. Medicos told him it would take an operation to straighten the bone so that he could walk natural and fork a saddle.

Webb Danvers was a forty-a-month cowhand. He couldn't rake up enough money to pay for the operation. He hung around the country for a month or so, soaking up rot-gut whiskey and cussing his luck. Then the day telegraph operator at Piute Wells took him in hand, taught him the trade. The railroad came through with a job.

All that ran through Webb's mind as he knelt in front of the safe and twirled the knob.. The puncher knew he had been plenty lucky to get on with the railroad. This hold-up was bound to cost him his job—or his life! Webb wanted to hang on to both. There was the operation, and a brown-haired girl—but he wouldn't let himself think about her until he had two good legs.

The safe door came open. The Rudioso Kid shoved the operator aside.

"Money for those Mexican senoritas!" he gloated, jerking out the canvas bags with "Piute Mine" stamped on them. "This is shore some haul!"

Webb compressed his lips. The Kid's words fanned the white-hot rage in his breast. But Webb knew that resistance was useless. What could a cripple do against the guns of killers like the Rudioso Kid? Or the hands of huge, black-bearded Moose?

Webb hobbled back to his desk. He picked up a pencil and nervously tapped the desk. The telegraph key clicked intermittently. Baxter calling Prescott. Webb's fingers ached to grab the key and flash out news of the robbery. Such an act would cost him his life, he knew. And it would be hours before help came through from Baxter.

"Ten thousand in cash!" the Kid exclaimed, licking his lips. "Hey, Moose!"

"Cut the brayin'!" Moose growled, sliding through the door. "Somebody just left the Bilbury house an' is comin' this way!"

"That fool deputy!" the Rudioso Kid sneered. His eyes flashed to Jiggs Cassidy's inert form and he made an in-

stant decision. "Drag him into the back office, Moose. And you, Crip," he said to Webb, calling him the hated nickname for the cripple, "grab some newspapers and cover that patch of blood. An' stall that deputy!"

When Cassidy's body was inside the Rudioso Kid backed up.

"Listen, Crip," he threatened, "I'll have my eye on yuh through a crack in that door. One false move an' I'll let the daylight through yuh in a dozen places! Get rid of that lawman—or yuh both die!"

THE Kid's threat ran through Webb's mind as he sat waiting for Lin Bilbury. Webb knew that if the lawman got suspicious and snooped around, it would be curtains for them both. The operator sucked in a ragged breath, sat straighter in his chair. He had to put up a good front.

He heard the deputy's heavy tread, looked up—and choked back a gasp. With the ruddy-faced, bulky lawman was a slender, smiling girl—Leona Bilbury, the deputy's pretty daughter.

After the first moment of shock, Webb thanked his lucky stars for the visor he wore. It hid the scared look in his eyes.

"How—Howdy, folks," he managed. "Thought yuh'd be in bed at this time of the night, Lin."

The deputy grimaced.

"I hit the hay 'bout an hour ago," he rejoined. "But L'ona, here, thought she heard a shot. She made me get up an' come down to see that the payroll was okay—and you!" He glared at his smiling daughter, then he added, softening a little, "Reckon it was just another excuse to see yuh, Webb."

"Nothing of the sort, Dad," Leona laughed. "You know I don't need an excuse to come and see Webb!"

She crossed over and sat on the desk, smiling down at him with provocative red lips. Webb sat idly tapping the table with the pencil, refusing to meet her eyes.

"Everything okay, son?" Lin Bilbury asked, easing the weight of the gun around his ample hips. "Where's old Jiggs tonight?"

"In there." Webb nodded his head at the express room. "Dead to the world!"

The deputy grinned. "The old coot better stay on the job better," he chuckled. "A man his age can't find work too easy."

"Sure can't," Webb agreed, toying with the pencil. "I guess Leona just imagined she heard a shot."

"Reckon so," Lin Bilbury agreed. He rolled a smoke and scratched a match on his pants. "Comin', honey?"

"Sure, Dad," Leona answered, wrinkling her nose at Webb. "This stuffy old night operator doesn't act like he wants our company!"

They left, and the depot was silent except for the clicking of the telegraph machine. Baxter calling Prescott. Webb sat without moving, a chill creeping up his spine. Sitting there with the Rudioso Kid behind him was like turning tail to a rattlesnake. Finally he heard the squeak of the door behind him.

"That was well done, Crip," the Kid chuckled. "Wouldn't that deputy have been fit to be tied if'n he knowed the Rudioso Kid was standing twenty feet away all the time—with a cocked gun!"

"I reckon he would," Webb answered.

He could feel the sweat breaking out on his body. There was a bleak, ugly look in the Kid's eyes. Moose was grinning. The Kid held his six-gun in a loving manner.

"I don't want folks to know who pulled this job," he said. "There's just one way to make sure."

"Yuh're gonna shoot me?" Webb's voice was explosive. He read the ruthless answer in the baby-faced killer's eyes.

"Yep," the Kid drawled. "It's a shore way to keep yore mouth shut!"

The gun shifted, lined on Webb's forehead. The Kid thumbed back the hammer. The operator half rose from his seat. Then a heavy voice sounded in the door.

"Drop that gun, Kid. Hist yore hands!"

Webb looked over the Kid's shoulder and saw big Lin Bilbury crouched in the door. His eyes flicked back to the Kid, saw the look of rage and terror flame in the killer's eyes.

"Look out, Lin!" he shouted.

The Rudioso Kid spun around, sent a wild shot at the deputy. Webb saw the lead rip into the door-jamb. Then flame and smoke spewed from Lin's gun. Three bullets ripped into the Kid's

body, sent him crashing back into the desk. He hung there for a moment, dazed and bewildered, then slumped to the floor in a curiously small heap.

Moose was clawing under his mackinaw for the gun he had taken from Webb. The operator made a hobbling step. His balled-up fist lashed out at the man's jaw. All the pent-up rage and fear and agony that he had gone through exploded in that punch. Moose's head snapped back. His knees buckled. He slid to the floor beside his dead partner.

GOSH, what a punch!" Lin Bilbury ejaculated, sheathing his gun and jerking out a pair of handcuffs. Webb saw Leona's white, scared face over the deputy's shoulder.

"Honey, you're wonderful!" He praised her. She ran to embrace him.

"They might have killed you!" she sobbed.

Webb patted her head, with a foolish, happy grin on his face.

"Now, now," he said. "You saved the day! Lin, if it hadn't been for Leona—"

Moose was shaking his head, a glint of sanity returning to his beady eyes. He stared up at the deputy, then at Webb. "What happened?" he mumbled thickly. "How come yuh're back here, lawman?"

Webb picked up the pencil and tapped it against the desk. He grinned down at the manacled outlaw.

"Leona is the day operator here," he explained. "She taught me the business. I couldn't tell her that you an' the Rudioso Kid were hiding in the express room, so I tapped it out in code. She got the message, and passed it on to Lin as soon as they left.

"Yuh shore walked in at the right time, Lin!" he added, mopping his brow with a bandanna. "The Kid was just about to quiet the other witness against him—with lead!"

"Webb, there's a nice reward on that baby-faced killer," the deputy drawled. "I reckon you an' L'ona will have to split it. Me—well, this is just in line of duty."

Webb sat down suddenly. He looked at Leona, and she smiled back at him. Then he looked down at his game leg and a slow grin spread across his face.

"We can sure use it, Lin!" he answered heartily.

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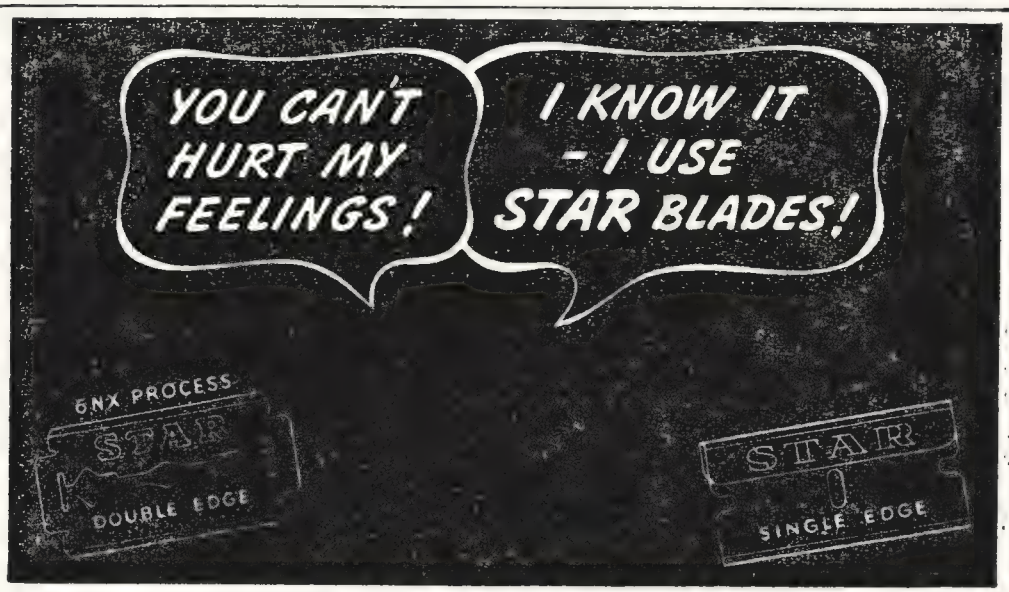

The hawk dropped on the mink with the force of a bolt from the blue

Little Lawless One

By PAUL ANNIXTER

Two bloody despots, the mink and the goshawk, wage a cruel and relentless struggle for domination in the wilds!

IT WAS a strange and unreal world, the yellow-gray kingdom of the dunes. A fantastic domain of sand and water, wind and storm—tranced and death-like—where every footfall, every movement except the movement of wind or of wings from aloft, was muffled in shrouding sand.

It was a world of little folk, a kingdom in miniature. It had its jagged mountains and precipitous valleys. These valleys and mountains had their sparsely forested slopes, their densely wooded fastnesses, but they were elfin landscapes, all of a neutral hue, formed of the shifting sands and the hogs-manes of stunted larch and sand-cherries that had found purchase on their arid slopes. In their pathless maze a man might hear a gun fired off two hundred feet

away and be unable to tell the direction. There the unskilled hunter might seek to penetrate and be hopelessly lost within a mile.

Once the mighty roamed those sandy reaches—the caribou and the elk, the prairie and timber wolves, the black bear and the demon wolverine. But these were not cunning enough to cope with the menacing sands, surrounded as they were by towns. All have gone the way of the buffalo, faded like snow before the roads and settlements of man. Only the smallest of the meat-eaters now remained, the mink and weasel, the raccoon and the shrew, who had found there a last sanctuary wherein to breed and hunt meeker and tinier animals.

Upon an afternoon in October one of the smallest and most ruthless of these lay curled up within the safe dry heart of a rotting log. Putoris, the mink, most deadly assassin of the dunes, was for the moment at truce with the world. Since dawn he had lain there, tail over nose, peacefully as any kitten.

The mellow fall sunlight permeated the powder-dry log with an even, comfortable warmth perfectly tempered for slumber, drawing a pleasing aroma out of the tinder-dry wood. Just now he was resting with cat-like complacency, his little eyes like bits of black tourmaline and full of a sinister intelligence, watching his front doorway for some sound intriguing enough to draw him forth. For such as Putoris are never too replete to kill anew and sip fresh blood.

FOR two weeks the hush of fall had added itself to the natural hush of the duneland. Fall had come, still and without banners here, but wonderfully rare and trancelike. Most of the birds had migrated. The hopping, churring life of the insect world was stilled by death or hibernation.

This was the magical time of year beloved by Putoris past any telling. Time when the pelts of the smaller fur-bearers were glowing with condition and the air of the dunes was charged with mystery. Time of still bright nights when the Hunter's Moon bathed the thickets with a strange and argent brilliance, turning Putoris' blood to liquid fire in his veins.

These were the nights when he could flow from shadow to covert, from covert to grass tuft so silently that not even the nesting grouse could hear him approach.

Presently would come the hour of four, that populous second feeding time of the thicket world. Then the rabbit families would leave their coverts and go slipping in silent files toward the willow dips, when wood-mice would shuttle back and forth on hidden runways bearing seeds, and Phit, the skunk, would lead her stodgy family forth on their evening stroll that ends at nine.

Within his hollow log Putoris continued to wait, a cruel, hard, implacable light in his beady eyes. That gleam was wont to turn red on the trail of meat. Not that he hungered, nor yet thirsted, unless you include the unquenchable thirst of all his kind for fresh warm blood. He was intrigued with the age-old game of ambush, waiting awhile though sleep had fled, to see what might be pounced upon before issuing forth on his regular night-shift hunting.

A half hour passed in which the mink remained still as stone. He watched the gray vista of sand and thicket that dropped away before his threshold. Then his fierce bright eyes were fired with a sudden cold rapacity and the circle of his curled body stirred and poured upon itself, snake-like.

A baby cottontail came hopping into view, its course leading it directly toward the watcher's log. Putoris flung himself on guard, his thin back bent like a bow, his head, the flat, triangular head of all deadly things—whether beast or serpent or man-made weapon—drawn back snakily on its long heavily-muscled neck. All innocence had vanished now from his attitude. His face was the face of a bad dream. The little eyes were fired with that sharp, hateful scrutiny, that glitter of malice, that marks all the weasel kind.

The approach of the rabbit was maddeningly slow and indirect. Momentarily it paused to sit up and question the breeze. Within the log Putoris seemed to have stopped breathing, yet his complex and high-strung nervous system was threatening to snap under the tension.

Finally but five feet separated the rabbit from the log. With a rippling quiver Putoris' short legs released his lithe body in a chain-lightning rush through

his open door. But that rush, timed though it was with the nicety of the expert killer, fell short. For in the same second or the latter part of the one preceding, something happened.

The rabbit shot into the air with a bound of panic desperation in its bulging eyes. It went streaking away with the speed of light, keeping pace, as it seemed, with a flitting shadow that also went sliding across the sands. Putoris, who had followed up his fumble with an indescribable leaping, rippling, doubling dash which even then might have overtaken the quarry, stopped dead in his tracks. Poised like an image of bronze, upreared on his haunches, he cocked a cruel snaky glance into the thickets ahead. He saw nothing, however. Only, a moment later, a single broken death-cry came from the rabbit as the life was struck out of it but a yard from its hidden burrow.

PUTORIS continued to watch and listen. There was the cold ferocity of several fiends in his little red-lit eyes. The rabbit had been his rightful prey. The prize already had been as good as his, for his tracking was sure as death itself. He had been in the act of overtaking his quarry when the rabbit had been struck down by this unknown, unseen pirate.

Therefore as he crept forward through the thickets, there welled up in Putoris the most terrible rage he had ever known. That rage was increased when, at the end of a careful stalk, he discovered—nothing. Nothing but a slash in the sand marking the spot where the rabbit had been violently done to death and whisked into thin air.

The killer of the rabbit, a raking, slashing, clipper-built goshawk, which is the peregrine falcon of feudal times, had arrived in the dunes only the day before on his flight southward ahead of the winter cold. After an easily surprised meal amid the stillness of the larches, he had decided to tarry and make the dunes his habitat at least for a time, for it was quite plain that the small life of this thicketed realm had never known the deadly prowess of one of his robber kind before.

He was a mature bird, measuring sixteen inches from tail to crown—sixteen inches of winged disaster. His claws were almost the claws of an eagle and edged like knives. His hooked beak was a sickle, no less. The dark curved markings on either side of it looked like a pirate's curling black mustache, marking him for the murderous swashbuckler he was.

The fact that the goshawk is almost the fastest bird that flies, that he possesses the mysterious gift of the falcon family for following automatically every twist, double and turn of a victim in the air or on the ground, and that murder is his natural profession, must be added to the picture. In short, the dunes were to be beset by another and even greater despot than Putoris.

When the hawk had made his stoop for the fleeing rabbit, he had been well aware of Putoris all the time. There was nothing, in fact, in the air or on the ground that was missed by those prism-binocular eyes of his. The fact that the rabbit should rightfully have fallen beneath the claws of the mink mattered nothing to this lawless harrier of earth and sky.

He knew that mink were fearless, chain-lightning fighters in their own underworld of the thickets. While he would have hesitated deliberately to attack one of Putoris' clan, he could afford to hold the mink's enmity as negligible by reason of his mastery of the air. Above the earth he was as much of a symbol of death as the mink was on the ground. He was entirely aware of the challenge of his act as he rose with his kill—a challenge that might lead to a long and lasting feud.

Yet at all times living up to his bandit role, he disregarded the fact and sent back a further challenge from the air. It was a harsh triple scream which sounded like "Killeee, killeee." Then he disappeared among the trees.

Though Putoris had never heard that sound before, nor yet had contact with a goshawk at first hand, it needed not experience to interpret that cry or its import. At the sound his thin black lips writhed back in a snarl of stark ferocity that was startling to see, and his little eyes took on the glow of embers. For instinct seemed to whisper even then, all that lay ahead.

The rest of that afternoon and the twilight that followed, as Putoris threaded the larch shadows in search of grouse, or

flowed like a gold-brown flame up and down the stunted evergreens on the track of squirrel, his fierce glance was ever directed ahead. He burned for a sight of the hawk, which as yet he had not actually glimpsed. And twice more that day he found signs of the other's presence.

ONCE it was in the form of a miracle —and wild folk, especially those who live without the law, have a horror of miracles. The trail of a red squirrel he had seen running through the larches by scent, just as a hound runs a trail on the ground, was discovered to lead to —nowhere. That trail simply ended, died out, abruptly and with utter finality, in the center of a broad glade of frost-silver sand, seventy feet from any tree or shrub. It was as if its maker had vanished suddenly into the land of spooks. Which is exactly what he had done. The unclean smudge in the pristine sand betrayed the secret.

The squirrel had been violently snuffed out of this life in mid flight. Two cruel claw-marks, that were larger than Putoris' whole head, told how. The claw-marks of a bird beyond a doubt, a bird that was taloned like a wild-cat! Once again Putoris stopped dead in his tracks and sat erect on his haunches while an almost inaudible gibbering sound came from his wrinkled lips. Then he left that spot as if he had been stung, with a speed that might have been taken for fright were it possible for one of the weasel clan to know fear.

Not many minutes thereafter he came upon the second sign, the badly torn and half-eaten carcass of a cock grouse on which some taloned fiend had dined but recently. No trail led to or from the remains but beside them on the sand were two downy brown-barred feathers. Those feathers smelt exactly as the claw-marks had smelt.

Putoris, as he sped away from that spot, swore strange and terrible things in rage and defiance—you could see him doing it though he vented little or no sound—and again his going was fearsome to watch. The gait of a mink is ever a startling sight. It is neither canter, gallop nor run and resembles the going of a snake as much as it resembles anything at all because of the ridiculous shortness of the legs.

Putoris' body was eighteen inches long while the length of his legs was little more than two. Times he covered the ground in four or five-foot leaps. Times he writhed and darted along the ground like a serpent, or arched his long, thin back like some fearsome nightmare of a measuring worm.

Putoris' movements, that night, were the embodiment of swiftness and precision, his hunting more than ever a carnival of cruelty and terror. Subtly changed, more deadly and agile than he had been for many weeks, he flowed through the thickets like a consuming flame, as if he were maddened by torture or pursued by fiends. The torture was that of impotence to retaliate against the insult of the unknown enemy.

Such fiends as he are beings of despotic wrath and this invasion of the hunting range he had come to look upon as his own especial domain, had goaded him to frenzy. An insatiable blood madness rode him this night, a fever that had nothing to do with the filling of his belly. He would kill, kill, kill! Only thus, it seemed, could he fling defiance in the face of the unknown raider from the air.

Along the upper ridges as the moon rose that night, the owls in the larches stopped their hunting to stare down at the scene of slaughter among the thickets. Rats and wood-mice inhabiting the crannies, amid the blow-downs, turned giddy with fear at what they saw and heard from their doorways. For Putoris had become death on four legs.

All the weasel kind love dramatics and tonight Putoris was revelling in the terror of his own name. Again and again he would single out a sacrifice from among the rabbit folk and run it down for the sheer joy of carnage. He was never one wholly and decently to devour a kill. Now he stopped only long enough to quaff a bit of warm blood from the throat of a victim before passing on to another.

THIS was but the beginning of the queerest feud the dunes had ever known, a prolonged contest of cunning and savagery between two skilled assassins, based on a despotic pride in lethal prowess.

For a week thereafter wherever the goshawk hunted among the dunes he found increasing evidence of the work of his rival the mink, who continued to

out-kill him six to one. Not lacking in wile, the fierce bird read aright the macabre challenge written in the fresh spore about the carcasses of the slain—his own and the mink's—and not for a moment was he in doubt as to who the other killer was. His own hunting became wary, with an eye out constantly for another sight of the sinister form of the mink, but throughout that time he was rewarded by no further glimpse of Putoris. But wherever either hunted he found that the other had been ahead of him on the trail.

As the days passed fierce murder glints began to play in the eyeballs of each at every fresh manifestation of the other's presence, although Putoris was not yet aware of the identity of his rival. Each of the killers was becoming the evil genius of the other. Their paths were ever crossing. Many a trail of rat, hare or squirrel Putoris ran only to have the quarry frightened to earth by the shadow of his enemy planing overhead. Or worse, he would find the half-devoured carcass and those grim three-taloned claw-marks in the sand beside it. And many a time the hawk returning in the afternoon to a kill he had made in the morning, discovered that the mink had visited the place.

It was not until the second week that Putoris first sighted his enemy. It was late afternoon. The goshawk perched grim and motionless on a bare upflung snag. Putoris was plying through the thickets toward his twilight hunting ground. The hawk might have launched a surprise attack on the other from on high, but as always a caution, tinged with awe, restrained him. The mink froze in his tracks and for a long minute returned the other's fierce stare, one foot upraised. He, too, might have devised a night attack upon the other but a similar healthy respect restrained him.

Such a game of wholesale slaughter, as these two played, soon made itself felt throughout the whole expanse of the dunes. No such pair of able killers can ply their craft for long in any range without a disastrous effect on the squirrel and rabbit crop. The game of Putoris' range, though sufficient for one such despot, soon grew scarce for two, and by the end of four weeks both bird and mink were hunting longer, harder and farther each day. Truth was the two now spent a large share of their time in watching and hunting one anther, fired by growing hatred.

About this time the first of the November snows came sifting through the larches, rounding off the contour of the dune landscape with a two-inch covering like white frosted sugar, coating every twig and branch. Air off the lakes became like a tenuous faint blue haze beneath the leaden sky. The squirrels of the region, never been over-plentiful, now kept close to their holes all day.

The lessening ranks of the cottontails were growing warier and warier from unprecedented onslaughts on the ground and from the air. Many, indeed, had removed to distant parts. And still the goshawk through some perversity, showed no sign of removing to a warmer, more favorable, hunting ground.

As a matter of fact the whole affair was outside of the hawk's dominion, for Nature who harbors no ungoverned outlaws in her scheme, was but using him as a means toward her hidden ends.

IT WAS on a day in late November that the situation forced its own drastic conclusion. Of late, Putoris had been hunting throughout the afternoon as well as the night, driven by the growing pinch of hunger as well as a growing obsession to out-kill the hawk. Within him, too, was a burning desire, stronger each day, to miss nothing that his enemy the goshawk might want. Therefore, he was often led to cover his entire domain within each twenty-four hours.

Always he found the sign and seal of the other hunter's presence—soiled and carmine spots in the snow where some bird or beast had been violently done to death and eaten on the spot. The inordinate wrath and outrage of a despot, mounted within him, all the keener because of its futility, for the winged brigand was proving too much for him.

On the afternoon in question a cathedral stillness of cold and snow lay over Putoris' world. No life seemed stirring. Even the gray jays, who roved daily in a clamorous gang among the larches, were silent. This is proof positive that something was wrong with the wild this day. The whole dune world seemed hushed and at pause, with finger to lips as it were.

Equally silent and doubly watchful

Putoris slipped through the thickets, his orbs pointed with fierce reddish glints in the shadows. He swarmed through crevices and crannies among the blowdowns, seeking to chivvy out some rodent as an appetizer, but today the imminence of something lay heavy over his kingdom. The dune world might have passed for the domain of the dead. Once a gray and shadowy presence seemed to float swiftly away above a gun-sight cleft in the sands, soundless and of startling size. Putoris set erect and craned, but the shadow did not reappear.

The mink's ill temper increased. He seemed a thing without bones, so swift and imperceptible was the play of his short legs. The oblique black markings about his mouth were wrinkled in a soundless grimace. He was out to find what was wrong with his world today. He found it quick enough.

In a narrow ravine he almost collided with a bulky form in a mighty hurry, a form whose green-shadowed eyes flamed with a light that came from fear. It was Lotor the young raccoon, born that spring, who had never been known to hurry, but he was hurrying now and there was nothing sportive in his haste, but a definite panic. He was swearing thickly as he went and it is doubtful if he even saw Putoris who flicked aside with a menacing hiss.

Shortly afterward in a rabbit runway, the mink met a ruffianly old buck rat, a catastrophe on legs, gibbering horribly and galloping blindly. He collided with Putoris head on. He was quite insane with terror, that rat, for he was fresh from the claws of death, as could be seen by his sides which were red with gashes. The rat leapt clear and hurled himself into a hole he knew. Putoris, too upset for the moment to kill, sprang wrathfully off at another tangent, every hair on his body erect. Then the sword which hangs low over all the outlawed, suddenly descended.

He was going fast and therefore was only vaguely aware of the sliding shadow he had glimpsed before, flitting above the thickets. When his glance did fling aloft it was too late. His rubbery sidewise bound died in the take-off as the great bird above him banked sharply and shot earthward like a feathered dart.

Like Putoris, the goshawk had been feeling the shortage of game in the region. Thanks to his own deadly efficiency panic was ever abroad in the dim ravines among the dunes. The few remaining grouse had left the region and the four-footed life of the thickets rarely crossed the open places of late.

On this day the hawk had been tacking and quartering for three persistent hours above the dunes, yet only a tiny woodmouse had gone to replenish the tense springs of his high-strung organism. As hour after hour found him still unfed his ferocity mounted to a flame within him and caution was banished. To see, in short, was to strike. His foolhardy attack upon Lotor, the young raccoon, was due to his complete loss of temper, and in the wilds to lose one's temper is an unhealthy thing.

The hawk paid for it a few minutes later by missing an easy stoop at the old buck rat. Whereupon the pirate's brain was lashed to blinding fury. When, but a moment later, Putoris emerged from the tangled thicket where the rat had vanished, the hawk dropped upon his enemy with suddenness and force.

Possibly in the first part of that hurricane descent, the hawk mistook Putoris for the rat— Possibly he was beyond caring, for a hawk that has missed his stoop is many kinds of a demon as any hunter will tell you.

Putoris heard the hiss of the enemy's falling body and his sidewise leap just before the stroke was all that saved him from instant death. As it was one set of the hawk's talons clutched him about the center of his back, cutting into the vitals, and the other closed in a paralyzing grip about his narrow haunches— closed and locked in the fish-hook grip peculiar to all the raptores. Such a grip cannot be losened for some minutes.

As Putoris twisted his slim sinuous body about to fight for his life, the goshawk keenly regretted his rashness. But there was neither time nor opportunity now to loosen his talons or withdraw from the sortie, which had become a death struggle. The deadly triangular jaws of the mink, aided by his supple neck were already lunging up at him, seeking a fatal throat-hold. Instinctively the hawk sought to carry the battle into his own familiar element of the upper air, and flapping heavily he rose from the ground, the mink twisting and battling in his claws.

A DREAD vertigo, as the earth dropped away beneath him, a terror which would completely have cowed a less courageous beast, served only to redouble Putoris' grim ferocity. The hawk met the vicious snappings of the other's grinning jaws with savage blows from his tiger-claw of a beak. The grip of his talons automatically tightened.

The swift, fierce struggle that then ensued was a battle royal, packed with dramatic high-lights, but staged high above the earth. Nothing quite parallels the blind rapacity of either mink or hawk in their respective realms. The vantage which had been with the hawk at the outset was quickly evened by Putoris who, with claws sunk into the enemy's breast, literally began to climb upward toward the hawk's throat, though the effort was an agony to him because of the other's talons deep-bedded in his middle.

Blood now soaked the hawk's breast and tufts of feathers torn out by the jaws of the mink trailed like smoke puffs in the wake of the battle. Again and again the stiletto-like teeth of the mink snapped shut within an inch of the hawk's throat.

Finally in desperation the great bird left off stabbing with his beak. Sanity seemed to leave him. He began driving upward with powerful thrusts of his wings, mounting higher and higher each second with a mad idea of leaving his deathly freight behind him. As the speed of his wing-beats increased, quite naturally he drew his legs up tighter beneath him. That little leeway was all Putoris needed. His snaky neck thrust upward and his jaws locked in the enemy's throat. The hawk's pinions stiffened suddenly, and next moment both killers locked in a grip like love, went hurtling toward the earth a thousand feet below.

MUCH later a pair of cottontails finicking under the moon, discovered their grim carcasses among the larch shadows. The word passed swiftly round and that night the surrounding thickets were populous with beady watching eyes. With the morning light the red squirrels noised the news to all the world and soon the undertakers came, the gray jays and certain others who have the final word in every forest drama—even a despot's death.

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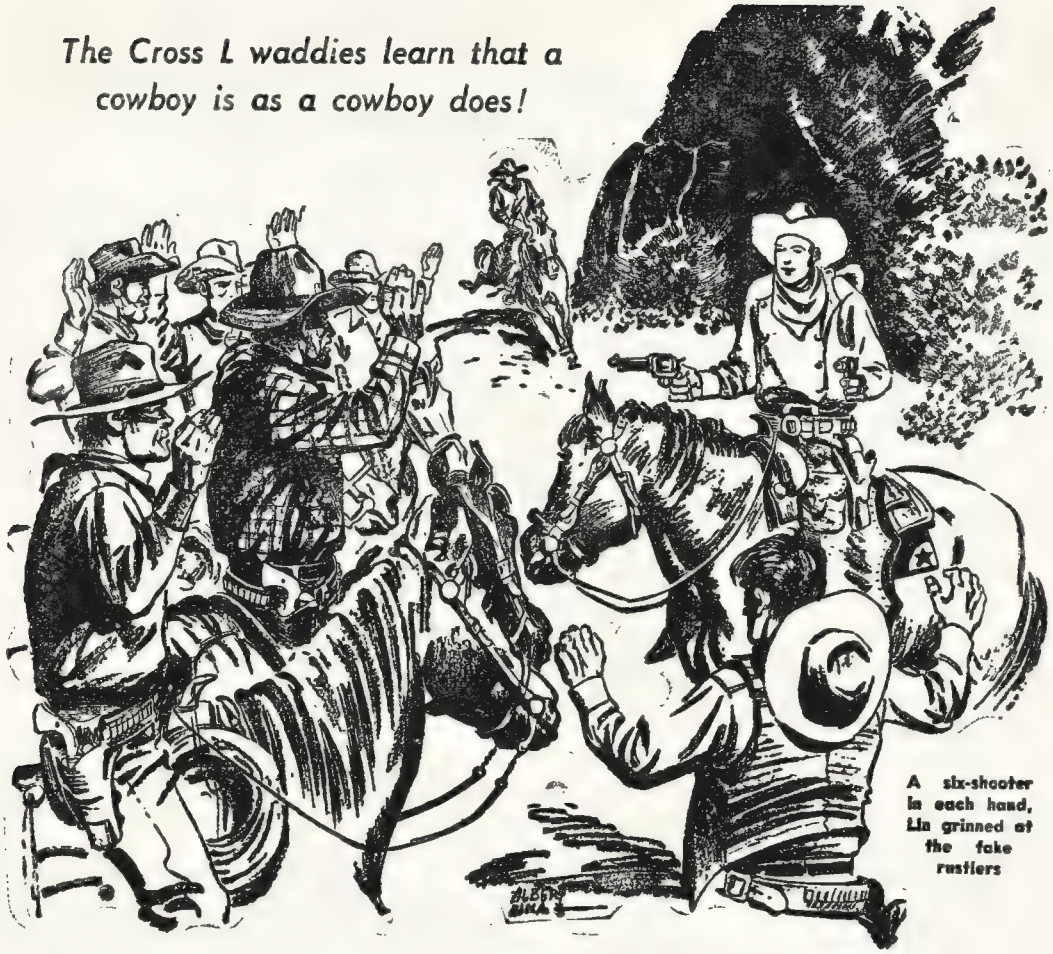
The Cross L waddies learn that a cowboy is as a cowboy does!



A six-shooter in each hand, Lin grinned at the fake rustlers

The Rawhide Kid

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

THE Lin Harlan spread was a big spread and a fine one, with every single cow brute there a pure-bred Hereford. Though the range crew was as chock full of wild mischief as any other set of whoop-'em-up cowboys, each member of it measured ace high.

But there hadn't been any pranks since old Lin's passing. The boys missed him so much that they didn't even think of pranks.

A fine cowman Lin was, the best horseman we'd ever seen. Left-handed, he was the best shot on L Cross range.

Naturally we kept wondering who the next owner of the outfit would be and what he'd be like. Lin Harlan had been a sort of lone wolf, never one to talk about his past or his personal affairs. He had no kin in that state.

Then one morning Lawyer Sam Munroe drove out from town and brought most of the answers. I called red-headed cowboy Yip Snell to take charge of the Munroe buckboard and horses, and sat down with Sam on the ranch house front gallery.

The lawyer started talking at once:

"Not sure I'm bringing you good news, Henry. It's another Linster Harlan who gets this place—old Lin's nephew, who is just old enough to vote. I located him in Denver.

"Seems there was a feud in the Harlan family, and that our Lin hadn't been on speaking terms with his folks for a long, long time, but he'd liked this young Lin, named for him, when he was a very little shaver, and he

leaves his property to him. But there is a hitch to it, Henry."

"Yeah," I said, "he'd be careful that way. What's the hitch, Sam?"

Munroe frowned. "It's that this young Lin Harlan must be worthy. Meaning, of course, worthy as old Lin would have seen it. You, foreman of the L Cross for ten years, are to do what you can to find out about that, and report your findings to me. You get it, Henry, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said, "think I do. But the youngster doesn't know about the hitch, does he?"

"Certainly not," Sam Munroe said, and kept going. "Shows that old Lin had great faith in you, Henry, and I'm sure you'll handle the thing properly. Lin the Second comes in on the noon train tomorrow. You must be there to meet him."

"Sure," I said. "From a big town, eh? Sam, you reckon he'll know a cow from a horse?"

Munroe only grinned. It was then that I became afflicted with a hunch to the effect that I was in for something.

That evening, I went to the bunkhouse and told the boys. Though their interest was keen, none of them said anything. Not that they were turning young Lin down without even seeing him—trouble was, they'd thought so much of his uncle.

EVERY L Cross rider who could be spared from the range was in town with me when the noon train came in the next day. We couldn't wait to see what would step off the train. Then we saw, and red-headed Yip Snell at my elbow spoke for us all when he mumbled:

"For gosh sakes!"

This new, slim young Linster Harlan was a sight to behold. He was just too darn pretty. It wasn't his face, eyes, or hair, for these reminded us, somehow, of old Lin. It was his clothes.

He had on a costly pearl-gray Stetson with a silver buckle on its leather band, purple silk handkerchief, wine-colored silk shirt, a powder-blue suit, and the showiest pair of Spanish boots we'd ever seen. A whole riot, that's what it was.

Sam Munroe, who had come up back of me, whispered into my ear.

"What the well-dressed cattleman will wear!"

"He thinks," I whispered back to Sam, and then turned to our redhead. "Take his suitcase, Yip, and put it into the buckboard."

Hiding our disappointment the best we could, we went forward in a body and I spoke to him.

"We're who you're looking for, Mr. Harlan."

Munroe stepped ahead of me and introduced himself and us by name. I'll say for young Lin that he did give me a very good handshake. But, I thought, anybody inheriting a forty-thousand-dollar ranch out of blue sky, would do that.

Then he was climbing into the buckboard with me. He didn't seem to care much for talk. When we were half way to the L Cross, I asked him a question.

"You got any everyday clothes in your baggage, Mr. Harlan?"

He shot back, "What do you expect me to wear out here—buckskin, or maybe rawhide?"

"Well," I said, "It's a rawhide country, so to speak. Rough, you know, man country. You a good shot?"

"Is it important?" he snapped.

"Well," I told him, "it breeds respect. Some times you run into a rustler or a plain bad hombre, or a rattlesnake or puma, and you're safer if you can shoot quick and straight. Your uncle could, left-handed though he was. He didn't have to take aim, like most men. He just pointed his gun like you'd point your finger, and let go. Maybe you didn't know that."

"And maybe I did," young Lin Harlan said. "Got it from my folks. When he was my age, Uncle Lin was a hellion. Never killed anybody though, I've understood. He left his home state then, and came here to begin all over again, and had luck. When I was four years old he gave me his gold watch because I liked to hear it tick. I've still got that watch."

He pulled it out and I saw it. This small thing impressed me in his favor.

We were within a mile of L Cross headquarters when the boys who had gone to town with me came riding past us, homeward bound. Pretending to be all lit up with red-eye, they were shooting and yelling like a pack of locoed Apaches. I hadn't ordered this. The boys were taking matters in their own hands, sort of.

The buckboard horses had broken into a gallop. I sat back on the reins and checked them. Then I cut an eye toward young Lin. He was a little pale.

"What was the idea?" he asked.

"Cowboys will be cowboys," I said. "Believe I told you that this is rawhide country."

"Wouldn't be trying to shake me up, would they?"

"Why would they be trying to shake you up?" I asked, and laughed. "By the way, Mr. Harlan, did you bring along anything in the nature of shooting irons?"

"No."

"Your uncle left a pair of ivory-handled forty-fives in his desk," I said, "and they're yours now."

He didn't reply to that.

THE youngster took over awkwardly in spite of himself. He was as green as a gourd. That is, in the matter of handling a big cow outfit. But he could ride, and he was no stranger to plain range work.

In the week that followed his taking over, I tried to get him interested in shooting and had no luck at all. If he even touched the

fine pair of six-shooters that his uncle had left in the living-room desk, I didn't know it.

He spent a good deal of his time riding the range in his fancy clothes, alone. It was as though he really wanted to get a line on big ranching but was determined that he wouldn't ask help from anybody.

The boys and I had come to like Lin Harlan the Second. But we were still in the dark as to what he had in him. His showy clothes were against him, so was the fact that he displayed no interest in shooting. We felt sure that old Lin, if he could have been there, would not have given this nephew the L Cross until he knew more about the lad than we knew.

Old Lin would have cooked up a way of finding out. We did, too.

No doubt there were better ways. But the test we settled upon appealed to us. It boiled down to this. The youngster could be forgiven his gun-shyness and his yen for flashy clothing —likely, time would fix these things—if he could only show us that, down in him somewhere, he had half the fighting steel courage that had been old Lin's.

The lawyer, of course, was still in charge of the L Cross finances; what excuse he'd given Lin the Second I didn't know, don't know yet. We made up the range crew payroll sheet, both the youngster and I okayed it, and I carried it to town and to Sam Munroe. Sam went to the bank and got the money, all in greenbacks, and I brought it out to the ranch.

On the way home I didn't ride fast. Our plan called for me to arrive around dark. Lin had an oil lamp burning on the desk. He met me at the front door and took the little payroll satchel. I turned back, and began to watch through one of the half-dozen open living-room windows.

Lin sat down at the desk—the rolltop kind, with drawers on either side and wide knee space in between—and counted his way through the thick sheaf of greenbacks. He had no more than finished this when a wellmasked face and a leveled six-shooter appeared at each of the windows.

It was risky, for old Lin's .45s were in a drawer within easy reach of the youngster's right hand and the drawer was open. We couldn't shoot back, of course. We could only duck.

Yip Snell did the talking. He turned his voice into a mean whine that I'd had difficulty recognizing myself.

"Bring the *dinero* over here to me, son, or we'll drill holes through yuh big enough for jackrabbits to hide in!"

This new Lin Harlan jerked around in his desk chair. He saw the masks and six-shooters and seemed to freeze stiff. His face had gone sheet white.

Yip's mean whine came again.

"Hustle—you!

"All right," young Lin said. "Don't shoot."

He rose and began gathering up the greenbacks. One of the bills fluttered downward and into the shadow. Quickly he bent down to get it, and was mostly in the shadow himself—smart, we thought. We expected that he would snatch out one of the guns and start shooting from the floor, and we ducked, you bet!

That pleased us mightily, since there was no man of us who didn't want to see young Lin make good. Cornered, fighting six masked, armed men—that certainly was making good.

I SIGNED redhead Snell to stay back, and hurried to the front door.

"It's Henry, Mr. Harlan," I called, to keep from being shot by mistake, and hurried in.

I saw nothing of Lin Harlan number two. That is, not until I looked into the deep shadow under the desk. And there he was, with no weapon in his hand. *Under* the desk!

"Come out, Mr. Harlan," I said, trying to hide my contempt. "They're gone."

He didn't come out, didn't even speak. I reached under and caught him by the arm and pulled him out, lifted him and put him in the chair. He blinked at me sort of dazed-like. Then he managed to get hold of his voice.

"Did they—did they take the payroll?"

The greenbacks were on the floor. I picked them up.

"Who was it, Henry?" he asked.

"How would I know, Mr. Harlan?" I said. "There's always stickups. Rawhide country, as I told you. Looks like they lost their nerve and high-tailed."

"I feel—rocky," he muttered, and he was still pale. "Pay the boys for me, Henry, will you?"

He got up, glanced absent-mindedly at the gold watch that old Lin had given him when he was four, then walked not quite steadily toward his bedroom.

Except for the few who were out rustler-guarding the range boundary, the boys sat in the lighted bunkhouse waiting for me. I paid them their forty dollars each, and gave them the sorry news as I did so. None of them said anything. It was Yip Snell who finally broke the silence.

"Henry, the more I see of young Lin, the more he makes me think of his uncle. I can't figger how he can be the rank coward he seems to be now. Maybe, him comin' from a big town, he just don't know gun stuff. So I'm for givin' him another chance before yuh report to Sam Munroe. Somethin' yuh see, where he'll have time to think. The false stickup was awful sudden."

Some of the other boys disagreed. But I didn't. In fact, if Snell hadn't suggested a second chance, I would, myself.

Yip and I rode together the next day and thought up another test. Eight of the boys decided to throw in actively with us. We perfected our plan in the bunkhouse that night.

Early in the afternoon of the day follow-

ing. I left my horse in the shade of a tree at the back, and hurried around to the front of the ranch house where I found Lin in a gallery rocker with a stockmen's journal open on his knees. Pretending to be a little mad, I said:

"Mr. Harlan, you ought to tell me about it before you let anybody leave this ranch with a hundred or so prime cows. How was I to know they were not being rustled?"

He sprang up and dropped his journal.

"What's eating you, Henry? I never have given anybody permission to take cows off this ranch—at any time!"

"You didn't?" The hardest thing I ever had to do was play my part here with a straight face. "Step this way and throw your eye up to the hills that edge the north range, and see what you see. In broad daylight!"

WE HAD timed it perfectly. Lin ran off the gallery, jerked his fine Stetson low in front to shade his eyes, and stared off northward. The big bunch of Herefords and the nine men driving them were a good mile away, but he saw them instantly.

"Where are the boys?" he snapped at me.

I manufactured a shrug.

"They're mostly on the west and south ranges. You reckon us two had better go after the cows ourselves, or—"

"Heck of a range boss and crew I've got!" he cut in with enough heat to set a prairie afire, and whipped into the house.

I waited there at the gallery steps, expecting him to come back in that same minute, hoping he'd have one or both of the old six-shooters. But he hadn't come out when more than a minute had passed. I hurried to the front door for a looksee into the living-room. He wasn't there. Then I heard a fast rattle of hoofs at the rear, and I ran to investigate.

Young Lin Harlan had taken my ready-saddled horse and was riding northward at a gallop, alone. There were trees between us now, and it was impossible to see whether he had on a gun, or guns. Catching out and saddling another horse took up three very long minutes.

When I had ridden clear of the headquarters liveoaks, Lin was nowhere in sight!

It would be the smart thing to veer to the ranch creek and ride across, keep the creek cottonwoods between him and the supposed cow-thieves and head them off in the foothills. If this was Lin's intention, and if he was armed and had just half old Lin's nerve, then the nine boys were in real danger. Probably he'd shoot one or more of them out of the saddle before they could tell him the truth!

Of course, our plan called for me to be with him—in the event he left the house—to prevent anything like that.

The horse he was riding, my own horse, had outrun everything on the place. The nag between my knees now was too fat. With a genuine scare thrown into me, I slammed spurs clean to rib bone and did my best to overtake the boys in time.

But my best wasn't good enough. Cattle and riders had vanished when I left grass behind. I followed into a crooked ravine. Ahead of me there was a swift double burst of gunfire—a pair of six-shooters, not one—mixed with yelling as lusty as any man ever heard. Fighting six armed men lone-handed proved that the second Linster Harlan had the stuff in him? How about fighting nine armed men lone-handed!

It was over when I caught up. Lin sat the horse with an ivory-butted big six-shooter dangling from either hand, grinning hard at the fake rustlers, each of whom had his paws as high as his arms would put them.

"Great idea," he was saying, talking straight to Yip Snell—"cowboys turning thieves. And you didn't even have brains enough to pick a night for it. Great idea!"

YIP'S face was redder than his hair. He saw me.

"You tell him, Henry. He won't believe us."

I rode around to Lin.

"Nobody hurt?" I said. "All that shooting, Mr. Harlan, and nobody hurt?"

"*Mister* Harlan, nothing," snorted Lin. "I never did like that. So this is rawhide country. Well, Henry, if you'll look close at their hats, you'll maybe fix to begin to understand a little something."

Several of the boys' hats were neatly bullet-holed. It had taken a superfine marksman to do this and not kill anybody.

"You can slay me for a coyote, Henry," blurted Yip Snell, "if he didn't do his quickest and best shootin' left-handed, same as old Lin!"

I owned up everything then. Young Lin laughed until he nearly cried. He had things to tell us, too, and some of it sure knocked all the breath out of us.

"About these fancy clothes," he said. "I took 'em off a cowboy so-called sport who owed me couple hundred and wouldn't pay it, and I couldn't afford to throw 'em away. Didn't bring any gun when I came because I'd promised a judge I wouldn't carry another one in that state for a year.

"Guns had got me in trouble. You see, I was a hellion, too, like Uncle Lin when he was my age. Also like Uncle Lin, I came here for one thing, to start all over again."

"But—but why did you hide under the desk the night of the fake stickup?" I asked him.

He holstered the six-shooters and then parted his hair to show us a short bare streak above his left temple. It was a deep bullet crease, just healed.

"When I ducked to snake a gun out of the drawer," he explained, "I hit that crease against the edge of the desk and it nearly killed me. I fell underneath, Henry, and didn't know much of anything until you pulled me out."

So that was it. Yip Snell said he'd be darned. So did I. Young Lin laughed some more.

"Rawhide country," he said. "Henry, would it tickle you much to hear that back where I came from I was known mostly as the Rawhide Kid?"

He sure had made good and the L. Cross was his to have and to hold. From that day on, we swore by Rawhide Kid Harlan exactly as we'd sworn by old Lin before him.

THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

and he had many duels with officers in different sections, but always made his escape. He was shot at and escaped so many times in these running gun battles that some seemed to believe that he bore a charmed life. He was hunted like a wild animal and seemed to enjoy it to a certain extent.

I happened to be in the drug store in Bristow one night. There was no one in the drug store except the clerk and I and like in most small towns the long distance telephone station was located in the local drug store. In walked a man whom I paid little attention to at first. He approached me and said he wanted to use the long distance telephone.

I referred him to the clerk, who was coming up from the back of the store, and he made known his wants to the clerk, who took one of the blank forms used for recording the calls and began making out the slip, after ascertaining that the call was to the sheriff at Chandler. Without looking up from his writing the clerk asked, "Who is calling?" and the customer replied, "Ben Cravens."

The pencil dropped from the clerk's hand and he looked up in a startled manner, but his look was perhaps no more of a startled expression than the one that instantly spread over my countenance.

"Put it down just that way," said the caller, and the clerk somewhat regaining his composure, complied.

Reckless Audacity

Here was a man hunted by the law who had the audacity to call the sheriff, tell him where he was calling from, inform him that he had been to Oklahoma City, had seen the opera, and invited the sheriff over to see him. When the sheriff must have replied that he would be over when he least expected it, he called the sheriff a liar and told him that when he did come after him, that he would not come back altogether, told the sheriff he was going over into the Creek Nation for a while, hung up the receiver, paid for the call and walked out, and left two young fellows, the clerk and myself, gaping at his back!

Cravens usually had some young fellow with him on his robberies. He would pick up some daring, desperate young fellow that would do anything that he told him to do. On one occasion, a young man working with him, he and the young man stationed themselves on a road north of Guthrie, and as travelers, whether they were farmers, business men or

[*Turn page*]

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homeseekers, came along, they were held up, robbed, and then with their rigs were corraled and herded in a nearby pasture where they could not be seen from the road.

There the young assistant highwayman would guard the group while Cravens went back to the road to add more robbed victims to the party as they came along. This process of robbery was kept up for several hours until there was quite a gathering in the pasture, then Cravens and his young assistant, having collected considerable cash and jewelry from his victims, rode away.

Blazing Guns

Cravens finally picked up a young fellow by the name of Dick Ainsley from the Sac and Fox Indian Agency, and after robbing numerous stores and post offices they planned to rob the bank at Blackwell.

Accordingly they rode into Blackwell late one afternoon to look the situation over and get the lay of the land. However, as they were strangers, their movements created suspicion and attracted the attention of the law. The sheriff guessed their identity and as they left, trailed them to an old deserted cabin outside of town where they no doubt intended to stay for the night and pull the bank job the next day.

It was dark by the time they reached the cabin and so the officers, without letting their presence be known, stood guard through the night awaiting daylight for the attack.

Just at daylight Cravens learned that the cabin was surrounded and decided to make a running fight of an attempt to escape, so both bandits leaped from the cabin with guns blazing.

Ainsley got about forty yards from the house and looked as though he was going to make it to the woods, but was shot through the heart and killed instantly. Cravens was dropped near the cabin with two bullets passing through his body, making ugly wounds that were supposed to prove fatal.

The wounded Cravens and the dead body of his pardner were hauled back to Blackwell in the same wagon. Cravens refused to say anything about his dead pardner except that he called him Dick. This led the officers to believe that the dead outlaw was the notorious Dynamite Dick whom Frank Canton had arrested and placed in jail in Guthrie a few weeks before and who had escaped and was then at large.

Dynamite Dick had escaped with Bill Doolin, another noted outlaw. Frank Canton was sent for and after viewing the body told the officers that it was not that of Dynamite Dick.

Sent to Prison

Canton visited Cravens on what was supposed to be his deathbed and the wounded outlaw, spitting blood from his wounds, cursed Canton for once shooting a bullet into the cantle of his saddle in a running fight. Then Cravens surprised everyone by recovering from his wounds. He was taken to Kansas where he was convicted of highway robbery and sentenced to Lansing prison for fifteen years.

After having served a part of the prison term within the walls, Cravens was put to work in a coal mine several hundred feet underground. At the mine working with him was a noted train robber by the name of Ezell. They planned an escape and after fashioning wooden revolvers covered them with tinfoil, making them look like murderous weapons.

With these fake guns they held up the guard at the bottom of the mine shaft and after relieving him of his guns and ammunition forced him to give the signal to hoist them out of the mine, and made the break for liberty right under the blazing guns of the guards around the top of the shaft.

Although these guards were shooting from all directions and Ezell was badly wounded, Cravens escaped without a scratch. He stole a horse nearby and was soon back in the wilds of the Osage country.

A Post Office Robbery

After being hunted by officers all over the state, he was next heard of near Kingfisher, where he had induced a young farmer, Bert Welty, to go with him and help him rob the post office at Red Rock, not far from the 101 Ranch.

To avoid suspicion Cravens dressed as a farmer, Welty wore a woman's dress and a sun bonnet. They rigged up a light wagon, tied an old plough on the back, hitched their saddle horses to the wagon and drove across the country to Red Rock.

They reached their destination about dark, tied the horses in the timber at the edge of the village and with their Winchesters in their hands, walked to the post office. When they arrived at the post office which was in a general store, there were several people in the store, and they held these up and robbed them.

Alva Bateman, the young postmaster, was standing in the back of the store when the holdup started and he fired one shot at the bandits. It missed, and he was promptly shot and killed by the outlaws. After killing the postmaster they proceeded to rob the post office.

The robbery having netted several hundred dollars, they started back to their horses in a blinding rainstorm that had struck while they were in the store and which made the finding of the outfit difficult, but having found the rig they again boarded the wagon and drove at breakneck speed through the darkness of the rainstorm until they ran into a gulch and wrecked the wagon.

They took the harness off the horses, placed their saddles upon them and were ready to go forward on horseback. Welty still had the sack containing the loot from the robbery, and Cravens now showed his true character.

He had used Welty and now he saw a chance to dispense with his services and at the same time take all the loot for himself. He picked up a shotgun from the wagon and in the darkness fired point blank at Welty's head. Welty dropped to the ground and Cravens, thinking that he had shot his head off, picked up the bag of loot, mounted one horse and leading the other left the scene.

Bert Welty Recovers

Bert Welty lay in the rain where he had fallen for several hours before regaining consciousness. He had in the darkness received

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only a part of the charge in his face, but it made a bad and dangerous wound.

He finally staggered to his feet and walked some ten miles to former Cravens' "hide-out" with a farmer on Black Bear Creek. The farmer got a doctor for Welty, who cared for him until he was well on his way to recovery.

In the meantime an officer at Perry, Oklahoma, had been notified of the crime at Red Rock and was on the scene early the next morning. The rain made the trail easy to follow and he soon came upon the abandoned wagon and harness, followed the trail of the two horses leaving the scene, overlooking the footprints of Welty.

The trail led in the direction of Pawnee, and within a few miles of the town the trail led to the house of a farmer named Cunningham. There in the corral this officer, Deputy Sheriff Jean Branson, saw two horses that looked like they had been subjected to hard riding, and thinking that both of the outlaws were there in the farmhouse, he left before his presence was discovered and hastened into Pawnee and got the sheriff and a posse to assist him.

When they returned they surrounded the house, then called Cunningham out and questioned him. Cunningham denied that Cravens was in the house and while the questioning was going on, Tom Johnson, a deputy sheriff from Pawnee, took a position in the open about twenty feet from the front door.

Cravens could no doubt see him for he pushed the front door open with the muzzle of his gun and fired, mortally wounding Johnson. Cravens then sprang out of the door and made a run of about eighty yards over plowed ground, then jumped over a bluff into a ravine and got away.

This was a remarkable escape, as a number

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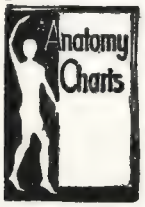

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of officers were all shooting at him, and in the group were Sheriff John Chrisman and Deputy Joe Weariman, both rated as expert riflemen and they had both emptied their magazines, but still Cravens had escaped without a scratch.

Welty is Captured

Within a few weeks the law tracked Welty down, he was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of Alva Bateman.

For a couple of years after the Red Rock robbery, Cravens was the most hunted, the most talked of outlaw of the time. Then he completely disappeared. He was accused of nearly every crime on the calendar, many that he did not commit, had the reputation gained only by the most noted outlaws.

The Mystery Cleared Up

The mystery of his disappearance was cleared up later. He had finally gone to Missouri, hired out to do farm work under the name of Charley Moust. He worked in one locality for several years, was looked upon as an honest citizen, married a farm woman and was above suspicion, when the old outlaw trait cropped out again. He stole a horse, was arrested and convicted, was sentenced to three years in the Jefferson City Prison. One day while in this prison he was recognized by a barber who had been in the Lansing, Kansas, prison, at the same time with Cravens. This barber told the prison officials. The Lansing, Bertillion record was brought in and proved that Charley Moust, the farm horse thief was none other than Ben Cravens, notorious Oklahoma murderer and outlaw.

Cravens was taken back to Oklahoma and tried at Guthrie for the murder of Alva Bateman, and while he pleaded not guilty and never admitted that he was

[*Turn to page 78*]

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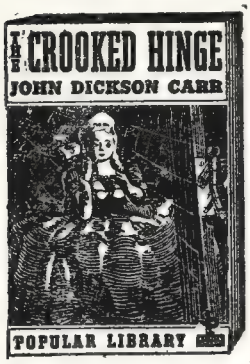

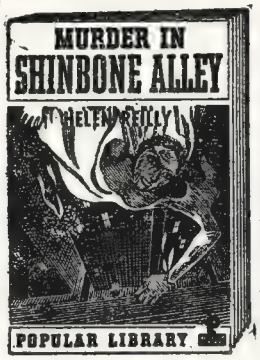

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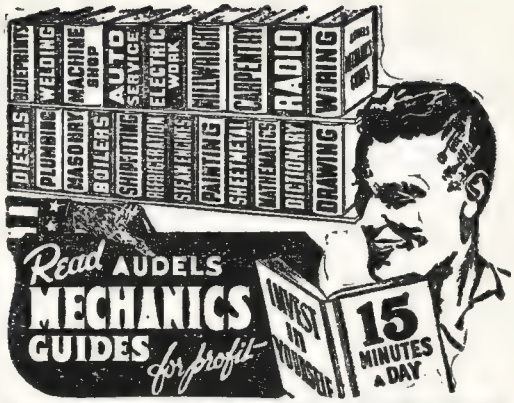

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convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth.

Welty was brought back from the penitentiary to testify against Cravens, which must have been a distinct pleasure to the outlaw who had been a partner of Cravens and who had been left for dead by him. Cravens was defended by a former outlaw, Al Jennings, who had been pardoned and was now a practising attorney.

Lawman Frank M. Canton went on to attain the position of Adjutant General of Oklahoma, and I knew him quite well. In fact I was present at the Tulsa race track a few years later when a race promoter attempted to defy the law and run horse races.

General Canton was ordered by the governor to stop the races. The promoter defied him and ran one race anyway. A volley was fired over the heads of the jockeys as they raced down the home stretch. Then the general, thoroughly angry, lined the militia up and declared that if another race was attempted they would shoot to kill. There were no other races run, the track was temporarily placed under martial law and the racing fans went home. *Adios!*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

CALIFORNIA just after the Civil War was a new land of promise, a place where gold might be found, but death and danger stalked. Killers, rustlers and bandits held up the overland stages and made life perilous.

SIERRA GOLD, by Tom Curry, the exciting Rio Kid novel in the next issue, has a number of such sinister characters stalking through its pages. There is Black Bart, mys-

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terious road agent, who is a poet at heart; Fred Kedwin, who is crooked enough to sell a bunch of would-be miners a salted claim, Smoky Lownes, the gunslick companion of Kedwin. These and other badmen all marshal their guns and wits against the Rio Kid as Bob Pryor again goes into action.

Here's an excerpt from the dramatic start of SIERRA GOLD:

"Throw down the box!"

The deep, hollow voice startled the stage driver, and the passengers riding inside. The horses jumped and bridled, snorting in alarm as a sinister figure stepped into the road.

The eyes of the double-barreled shotgun were no more terrifying than the slits in the flour sack which the road agent wore over his head as a mask. The shapeless sack gave a malformed impression, made the bandit appear huge in the frightened vision of his victims. The ordinary linen duster covering his legs to the boot tops, and other common gear seemed extraordinary in that feverish moment.

"Black Bart!" gasped the driver.

With a convulsive movement he kicked the express box into the road. It had been riding under his long legs, doubled up on the high seat atop the Concord stage. A rakehell ribbon twister as a rule, Marty, the driver, felt his throat grow constricted and dry as he realized who had him covered.

White faces showed, unmoving, in the windows of the stage. Everybody had heard of the terrible Black Bart, who loomed a giant in the imagination of men. Elusive, mysterious, Black Bart struck as he pleased in central and northern California—the Law had never come close to him.

Seeing a pretty woman among those looking out, the robber politely bowed from the waist, the flour sack rustling.

"Do not be alarmed, madam," he said. "I won't harm you." He motioned to the stage driver. "Get down and turn the horses loose."

There was no idea of disobedience in Marty's shocked mind. Black Bart's reputation made it impossible to fight. Quickly the stage driver unhitched the skittery horses. As soon as they felt the traces loosened, they bolted, ripping the reins from Marty's

[*Turn page*]

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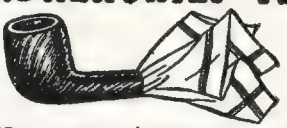

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fear-weakened hands, and ran madly down the rocky road of the mountain pass, disappearing quickly around the turn.

The bandit seized the express box marked "Wells, Fargo & Co." It was heavy with gold from the placer mines of the northern Sierras. With his booty, Black Bart backed off and melted into the manzanita at the side of the pass, disappearing through the camouflaged gap as suddenly as he had come. Somewhere near was his horse, and the stage was stranded. . . .

It's the Rio Kid and his companions, Celestino Mireles and Wyatt Earp, who come to the rescue of those on the stage. Black Bart is gone—and they are not able to catch him, but they head for the nearest ranch to get fresh horses for the stage.

Pryor meets the four passengers on the stage. Colonel Timothy Thorpe and his daughter Edith, and Major Fred Kedwin and Dan Lownes. The Rio Kid learns that Kedwin plans to sell Thorpe a gold mine.

As the Rio Kid, Earp and Mireles approach a ranch they know they are heading into trouble.

"Hear that gunfire?" demands Earp. "It's right ahead!"

They swung on toward the ranch. Rifles and pistols are banging in the hills, just over the next rise, screened by manzanita. The Rio Kid feels the quickening of his blood and Saber, his dun warhorse, snorts in excitement and spurts forward. A battle trained animal, he enjoys a scrap as much as his master does.

Pryor is first over the rise, and looking down the river valley can see some running cattle to the right, near the silver stream which forms the beautiful, wide range. A dozen riders are across but turning. They are driving several steers before them, when four men come upon them and try to check them.

An expert strategist, the Rio Kid takes all this in at a glance. He swings to Mireles and Earp as they join him.

"Looks like that gang in the river was runnin' off some cows and got caught in the act," he says. "But those other four are in trouble!"

The quartet have their backs to the approaching three. Moving swiftly in through broken brush, the Rio Kid sees a line of horsemen snaking up to the rear while the main bunch keep the cowmen busy. They are moving behind a low spur which hides them from the little group trying to stop the rustling!

The Rio Kid and his two friends ride to the rescue with guns roaring and save Johnny Vale and some of the young ranch owner's waddies. The rustlers are driven away—and Vale is glad to supply the stage with fresh horses after it's all over.

With swiftly increasing drama the story progresses and the way in which the Rio Kid goes into action and proves that the mine has been salted and that Fred Kedwin is a ruthless blackguard makes SIERRA GOLD an exciting novel from start to finish. You'll enjoy every bit of it.

There will also be a number of fast moving shorter Western yarns in the next issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN. A gala number!

LETTERS FROM READERS

WE HAVE been quite pleased with the yarns our authors have turned out lately, and we would certainly like to have your opinions of them. Please write us a letter or

postcard telling us which stories you liked best and which you didn't like.

We'll print a few excerpts from your postcards and letters every issue. Please address all communications to The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Here's our first letter:

As a constant reader of your esteemed magazine I resent very much the rôle assigned to our old friend, Celestino Mireles, in the Rio Kid novel, INDIAN OUTPOST, in the Spring issue. Our genial and smiling Mexican has been demoted to nothing but a mere supernumerary. All he says in the entire story is, once, "I am glad to see you, General," and once: *"Madre de Dios!"* Come, come, this will never do. If we're to have tamales, let's have them hot or not at all. Also our old pal, "Saber," is relegated to the background where he definitely doesn't belong. As I recall it, only once does that famous stripe down his back quiver and there is no mention whatever of that malignant (to evildoers) "mirled" eye. This is unequivocal *"Lese Majeste."* If this is author Tom Curry's fault, I say: "Hey, feller—cut it out!"—*Charles S. MacLean, New York, N. Y.*

We didn't particularly mind those lapses in that yarn ourselves, but that may have been because we got so excited over whether Bob Pryor would be able to save Fort Kearney from the Indians. We'll try to see that Celestino plays a bigger part from now on—and thanks for your letter.

I have been reading THE RIO KID WESTERN for some time and I think it is swell. I enjoy all of the stories, but INDIAN OUTPOST, by Tom Curry, was one of my favorites.—*Bob Parsons, Chicago, Ill.*

Thanks for your kind words, Bob. Glad you like the magazine so well.

Thats all for now. Be seeing you.

—THE EDITOR.

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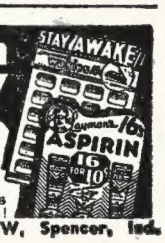

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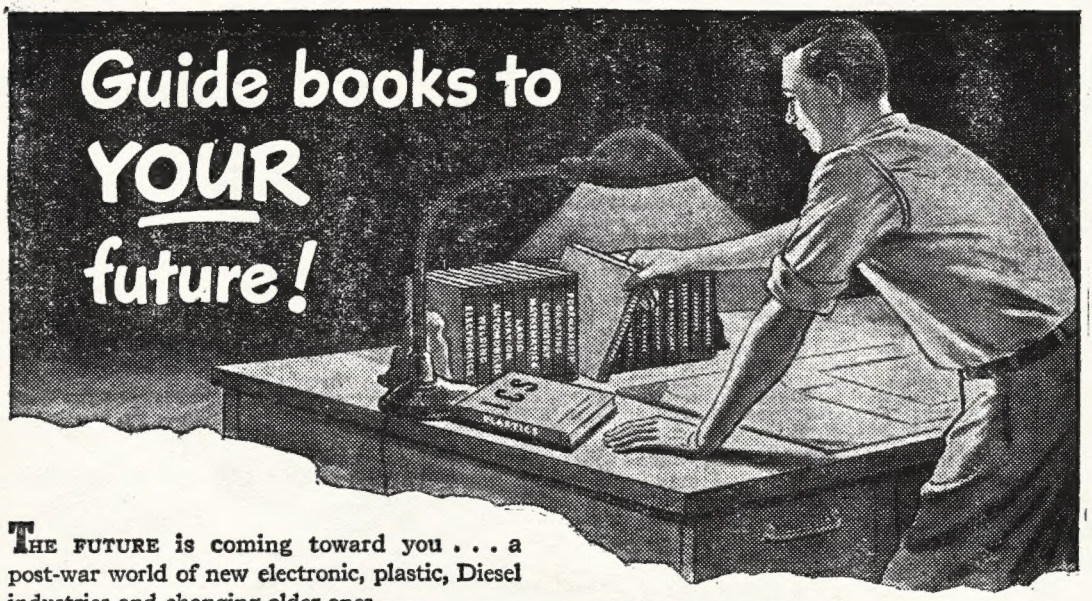

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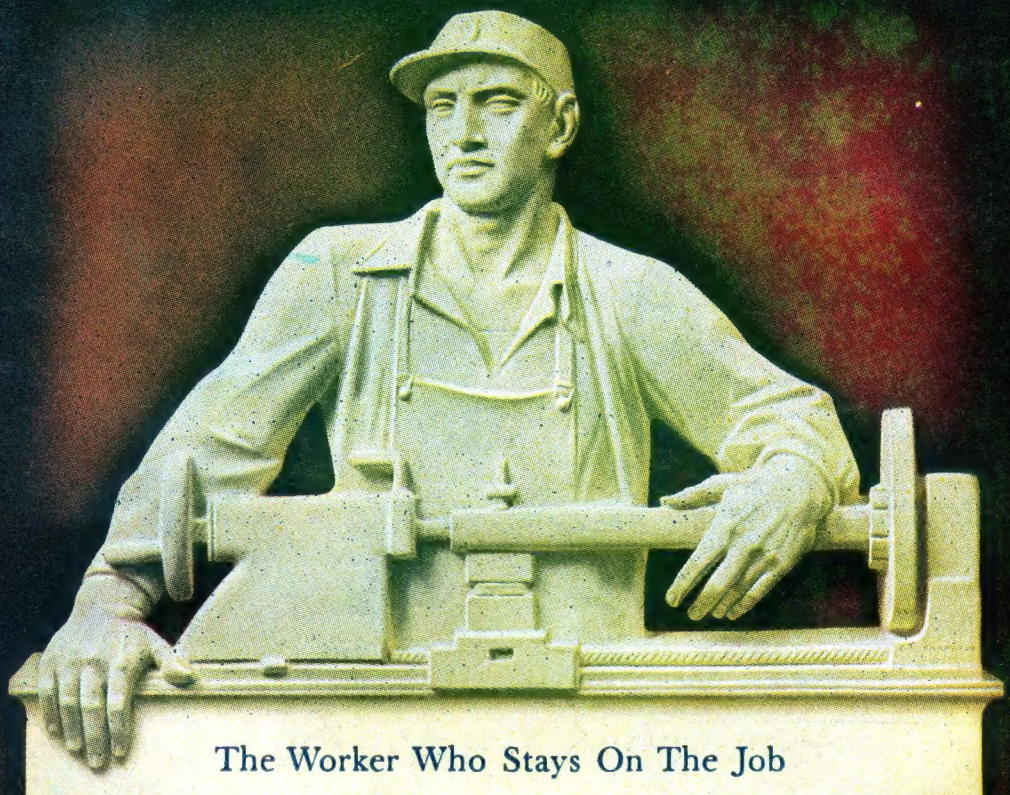

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